Obedience & the Rise of Authoritarianism
Why are Most People Cowards?

Academy of Ideas

"Authoritarianism in religion and science, let alone politics, is becoming increasingly accepted, not particularly because so many people explicitly believe in it but because they feel themselves individually powerless and anxious. So what else can one do...except follow the mass political leader...or follow the authority of customs, public opinion, and social expectations?"

Rollo May, Man's Search for Himself

The American psychologist Rollo May wrote these words in 1953, and in the decades that followed the West tiptoed into tyranny. A mass surveillance state was established, free speech gave way to increasing levels of censorship, statist bureaucracy and stifling regulations invaded ever more areas of life, and tax rates reached levels that in the past would have caused a revolution. However, in recent years this tiptoe into tyranny has turned into a sprint, as some Western countries are flirting with full-blown totalitarian rule. But the existence of power hungry and psychologically disturbed politicians who desire total control is not what makes our situation particularly precarious, for such individuals exist in all ages. Rather, our troubles lie with the fact that very few people possess the one virtue that can turn the tide back in the direction of freedom, that being, the virtue of courage. And as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn warned in 1978:

"A decline in courage may be the most striking feature which an outside observer notices in the West in our days...Should one point out that from ancient times declining courage has been considered the beginning of the end?"

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, A World Split Apart

In this video/article we are going to explore how a hyper-conformity and blind obedience has infected the West and, in the process, crowded out the cultivation of courage. We will discuss how a widespread cowardice is permitting the rise of authoritarianism, and how a rebirth of courage is the antidote to our precarious political predicament.

The pathological conformity that infects the West is generations in the making and the result of a confluence of factors. It is driven by a value system in which social validation occupies a pre-eminent position. It is furthered by the use of social media and the fact that success on these platforms is achieved by virtue signalling and conforming to the moral flavours of the day. It is also a product of an education system which deifies the democratic ideal and promotes the rights of the majority over the rights of the individual. These factors, combined with others, has created a society of hyper-conformists, and as the psychologist Rollo May explained:

"The opposite to courage...in our particular age, is automaton conformity."

Rollo May, Man's Search for Himself

One of the ways that Western conformity manifests is through a blind obedience and a pathological need to follow rules. Most people believe that to be a good person is to be a compliant person and to do what one is told by those in positions of political power and their lackeys in the media and celebrity culture. In acting with blind obedience, the conformist fails

to differentiate between morality and legality and so remains willfully ignorant of the fact that government rules can be immoral, driven by corruption, and that sometimes they pave the way for individual and social ruin. Or as Rollo May explains:

> "...our particular problem in the present day...is an overwhelming tendency toward conformity... In such times ethics tend more and more to be identified with obedience. One is "good" to the extent that one obeys the dictates of society... It is as though the more unquestioning obedience the better...But what really is ethical about obedience? If one's goal were simple obedience, one could train a dog to fulfill the requirements very well."

> *Rollo May, Man's Search for Himself*

To see other people exercise independent judgment, self-responsibility and self-reliance, disturbs the conformist's belief in the value of obedience and so threatens their sense of self. It is not the case, therefore, that the conformist obeys while permitting others the freedom to make their own choice, rather, as Stanley Feldman explains in a paper titled *Enforcing Conformity*:

> "...people who value social conformity... support the government when it wants to increase its control over social behavior and punish nonconformity...valuing social conformity increases the motivation for placing restrictions on behavior...the desire for social freedom is now subservient to the enforcement of social norms and rules. Thus, groups will be targeted for repression to the extent that they challenge social conformity...

> *Stanley Feldman, Enforcing Social Conformity: A Theory of Authoritarianism*

When a majority advocates for the government enforcement of conformity, a society places itself on what the psychologist Ervin Staub called a continuum of destruction. As the government uses coercion and force to punish a noncompliant minority, the majority rationalizes their support of such authoritarian measures by further demonizing the noncompliant, thus leading to increasingly severe government measures.

> "One psychological consequence of harm-doing is further devaluation of victims...people tend to assume that victims have earned their suffering by their actions or character." (Staub)

> *Ervin Staub, The Psychology of Good and Evil*

In several countries in the 20th century, such as the Soviet Union, Turkey, Germany, Cambodia and China, government measures such as banning certain minority groups from restaurants, pubs, cafes, and other public spaces, imposing curfews, expelling them from their jobs, forcing them to pay fines, and restricting their freedom of movement and assembly, functioned as the first steps on a continuum of destruction that ended in mass-scapegoating, mass-imprisonment and mass-murder. In his book the Psychology of Good and Evil, Ervin Staub elaborates on the psychological mechanism that facilitates a continuum of destruction.

> "How does harmful behavior become the norm?...Doing harm to a good person or passively witnessing it is inconsistent with a feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others and the belief in a just world. Inconsistency troubles us. We minimize it by reducing our concern for the welfare of those we harm or allow to suffer. We devalue them, justify their suffering by their evil nature or by higher ideals. A changed view of the victims, changed attitude toward that suffering, and changed self-concept result."

> *Ervin Staub, The Psychology of Good and Evil*

To counter the continuum of destruction that is a product of too-much conformity and too-much government force, more people need to act with moral courage. Moral courage entails a willingness to encounter risks so as to defy immoral orders, reject authoritarian government control, and to stand up for the disappearing values of truth, freedom, and justice. And as Rushworth Kidder explains in his book Moral Courage:

> "Where there's no danger, there's no courage…Anyone can "endure" security and well-being. The real challenges…arise in the face of hazard… So it is with moral courage, where danger is endured for the sake of an overarching commitment to conscience, principles, or core values.
>
> *Rushworth Kidder, Moral Courage*

Some acts of moral courage are accompanied by mild risks, such as being ridiculed, insulted or ostracized. If, for example, we speak out against a status quo belief in the presence of a group of conformists, or if we refuse to adhere to social practices or mandates that are immoral or idiotic, we may lose friends or attract choice words from the obedient. But this is a small price to pay in exchange for doing what we believe is right, for as Rollo May explains:

> "The hallmark of courage in our age of conformity is the capacity to stand on one's own convictions…"
>
> *Rollo May, Man's Search for Himself*

However, sometimes acts of moral courage are accompanied by more grave risks including, but not limited to, the loss of employment, physical or financial penalties, imprisonment, or in some cases, even death.

> "Of all the agonizing ethical dilemmas facing humanity, few are more wrenching than the choice between what's right for the world and what's right for [you and] your family."
>
> *Rushworth Kidder, Moral Courage*

Carl Jung called the men and women willing to confront great dangers in defiance of tyranny "the true leaders of mankind". And to learn about the mindset of one of these leaders we can turn to the story of Viktor Pestov.

In 1967 Pestov was a 20-year-old living in the Soviet Union. His family was well off by Soviet standards, and his mother was a high-ranking member of the KGB. Yet Pestov could not avert his eyes from the boot of tyranny that was crushing society and so he took a keen interest in political matters, and when Soviet tanks rode into Czechoslovakia and violently stamped out the human rights protest known as the Prague Spring, Pestov told his friend:

> "We must do something about this."
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> *Viktor Pestov, Quoted in Moral Courage by Rushworth Kidder*

Pestov and his brother set up a clandestine group called "Free Russia", and he warned those who joined that they would likely be arrested within the year. Yet all agreed that the battle for freedom justified the risk, and so they began publishing pamphlets exposing the lies of the Soviet Regime and snuck out in the dead of night to distribute them. The KGB quickly identified the group as a threat and in 1970 Pestov was arrested, his mother was fired from the KGB and never allowed to work in Russia again, and Pestov was sentenced to 5 years in a Soviet prison camp.

Pestov decided to stand up to the Soviet Regime and therein place himself, and inadvertently his mother, in great danger, because he could not in good conscience sit idly by as a corrupt regime of thousands destroyed the lives of millions. He understood that if he did not stand up for the freedom of others, he could not expect others to stand up for his, and that if nobody did anything, everyone was doomed. And so, he chose to face danger, to fight for freedom, and to place a portion of the fate of society on his back. He saw himself as fighting against the malevolent idea that: "someone will think for you, someone will make decisions for you", and as he explained:

"A person should be the master of his own fate."

Viktor Pestov, Quoted in Moral Courage by Rushworth Kidder

In a conversation with Rushworth Kidder, Pestov reflected on the grave dangers he voluntarily faced and on the 5 years he spent in prison:

"I believe I did the right thing, I wasn't silent. I was saying and doing what I had to do. There was a very small contribution of mine to the fact that the Communists were pushed out of power."

Viktor Pestov, Quoted in Moral Courage by Rushworth Kidder

Unless more people can muster up the moral courage to renounce conformity in favour of standing up for freedom and for what is right, and at the very least make a small contribution to combatting tyranny, Western societies will continue moving towards what Ayn Rand called the stage of the ultimate inversion. Or as she warns:

"We are fast approaching the stage of the ultimate inversion: the stage where the government is free to do anything it pleases, while the citizens may act only by permission; which is the stage of the darkest periods of human history, the stage of rule by brute force."

Ayn Rand, Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal