

AFTERWORD

Working against Injustice

The preceding pages have presented a rather grim picture of human society and the human mind. It is my hope, however, that in clarifying the sources and operation of social acquiescence, they will be of practical value to those who have undertaken the difficult work of struggling against unjust social stratification, the conformity that sustains it, and the consent that reproduces it. On the other hand, the preceding analysis may be so grim that some readers might wonder if the forces fostering consent are just too great to be overcome. Here, a few words of encouragement are in order.

First, while many psychological tendencies push toward conformism, many work against it. Empathy is an obvious case. At least some degree of empathy can be produced simply by deciding to take another person's point of view. Moreover, in many situations, especially when one directly sees another person's suffering, empathic feeling results spontaneously (Davis 1994, 124–25). This is why large areas of ideology (such as cognitive modeling in racism, sexism, and homophobia) must operate to inhibit empathy, for it is a continual threat to oppressive hierarchies that produce great human pain.

Moreover, many social and psychological structures and propensities that seem consensual may be reoriented toward nonconsensual ends. For instance, the operation of cognitive exempla may undermine the most carefully scripted Pentagon propaganda—in part through triggering empathic identification. One need only recall the impact of two famous photo-

graphs from the Vietnam War: a naked girl burned by napalm, a blind-folded man shot point blank. Similarly, economic insecurity can not only inhibit but inspire activism—in the context of carefully developed solidarity among those who share that insecurity.

Or consider the conformity that results from the belief that one is alone in holding a particular view. Many people will actually deny the plain evidence of their senses, regarding simple observational matters, in order to make their responses fit with what everyone else is saying (see Biener and Boudreau 1991, 449–51). Related to this, in Stanley Milgram’s famous studies of obedience, a significant majority of test subjects were willing to deliver evidently fatal electrical shocks simply because the experimenter told them to do so (*ibid.*, 442–44). What might one possibly do to work against such tendencies? In fact, the answer to this question is remarkably simple: one should visibly dissent, refuse to go along. Lois Biener and Louis Boudreau point out that “the most effective means of undermining the power of . . . authority” is “to provide the subject with disobedient peers” (445). Because of human psychology, consent tends to breed consent. But for the same reasons, dissent tends to breed dissent. “Asch (1955) discovered that the presence of a single deviant from the otherwise unanimous majority reduced the amount of conformity to about one-quarter of what it had been when the [participants] expressed unanimity.” Indeed, “regardless of the size of the majority, the presence of a single dissenter always reduced conformity” (457).

For readers who may feel encouraged to take up such dissident work, I include the following—very incomplete—list of outlets for activism. For those who feel strongly that things should change, but also feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the task and multiplicity of different outlets, I might offer one concluding bit of advice. No one can do everything. When considering what sort of activism to undertake, first decide what you are genuinely inclined to do. Don’t hold yourself up to an impossible ideal—then you will end up doing nothing. Choose an outlet that you are comfortable with. Whatever you do is good, whether it is organizing a rally or writing letters from your home. There are many types of work that need to be done. As Woody Allen said, if everyone in New York went to the same deli on the same day, there would be chaos. The same is true of activism. Diversity is good, even among dissidents.

American Civil Liberties Union
132 West 43rd
New York, NY 10036-6599
www.aclu.org

American Council for Voluntary
International Action
1717 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Suite 701
Washington, DC 20036
202-667-8227
www.interaction.org

American Friends Service
Committee
1501 Cherry
Philadelphia, PA 19102
215-241-7000
www.afsc.org

Americans for Democratic Action
1625 K St., NW
Suite 210
Washington, DC 20006
202-785-5980
adaction.org

Amnesty International
322 Eighth Ave.
New York, NY 10001
www.amnesty.org

Campaign for Labor Rights
1247 E St., SE
Washington, DC 20003
541-344-5410
www.summersault.com/~agi/clr/

Center for Campus Organizing
165 Friend St.
Boston, MA 02114-2025
617-725-2886
cco.org

Committee in Solidarity with the
People of El Salvador
P.O. Box 1801
New York, NY 10159
212-229-1290
www.cispes.org

Co-op America
1612 K St., NW, #600
Washington, DC 20006
202-872-5307

Democratic Socialists of America
180 Varick
New York, NY 10014
212-727-8610
www.dsusa.org

Economic Democracy Information
Network
garnet.berkeley.edu:3333/

Gay and Lesbian Alliance against
Defamation
8455 Beverly Blvd.
Suite 305
Los Angeles, CA
www.glaad.org

The Greens/Green Party USA
P.O. Box 1134
Lawrence, MA 01842
978-682-4353
www.greenparty.org/

Institute for Global
Communications
www.igc.org

International Human Rights
Association of American
Minorities
Suite 253, 919C Albert St.
Regina, SK
S4R 2P6 Canada
306-789-0474
www.ihraam.org

Labor Party
Box 53177
Washington, DC 20009
www.labor.net.org/lpa/

NAACP Washington Bureau
1025 Vermont Ave., NW
Suite 1120
Washington, DC 20005
202-638-2269
www.naacp.org

National Labor Committee
275 Seventh Ave.
15th Floor
New York, NY 10001
212-242-3002
www.nlc.net.org

National Organization for Women
P.O. Box 96824
Washington, DC 20090-6824
202-331-0066
www.now.org/

New Party
88 Third Ave.
Suite 313
Brooklyn, NY 11217
800-200-1294
www.newparty.org/

Oxfam America
26 West St.
Boston, MA 02111
800-77-OXFAM
www.oxfamamerica.org/

Peoples' Global Action against
'Free' Trade and the WTO
www.agp.org

Webactive
www.webactive.com

Witness for Peace
1229 Fifteenth St., NW
Washington, DC 20005
202-588-1471
www.w4peace.org

In addition, Web sites for such groups as the following may be found easily through standard search engines: Greenpeace; Independent Media Center; 50 Years Is Enough; U.S. Network for Global Economic Justice; The Ruckus Society; Action Resource Center; Act UP.