

Bob Altemeyer

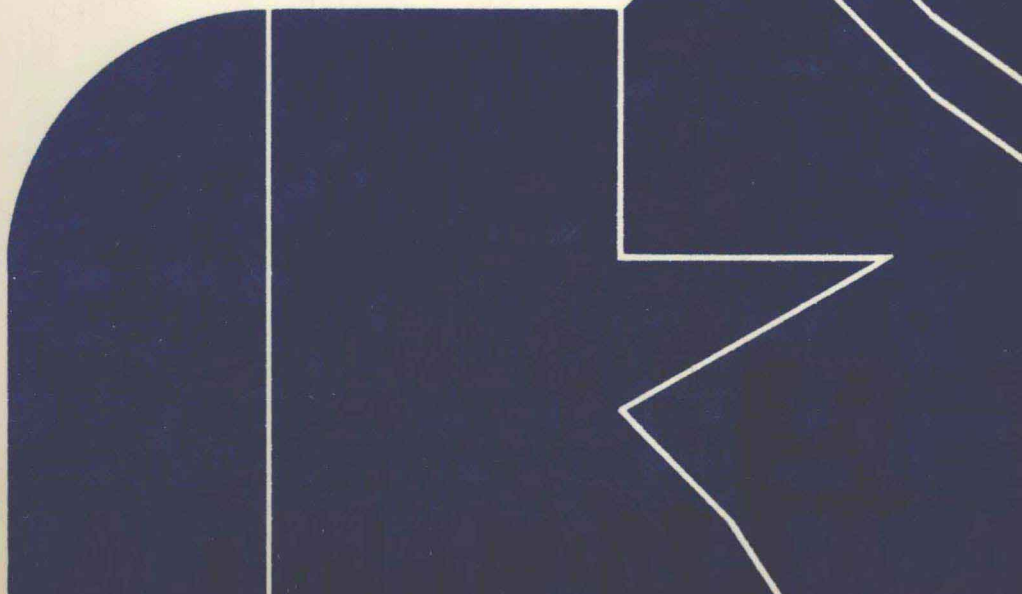


ENEMIES

OF

*Understanding
Right-Wing
Authoritarianism*

FREEDOM





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Understanding Right-Wing Authoritarianism

by Bob Altemeyer

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Foreword

It was 38 years ago that I reviewed a great, faulted, not very readable book for the old *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, then edited by my mentor Gordon Allport. The book, really a collection of semi-independent monographs, was *The Authoritarian Personality*, by T. W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford. As I wrote at that time, “The California investigators, to put it figuratively, set out to track a jackal and found themselves at grips with behemoth. Their initial studies indicated that anti-Semitism, far from being an isolated though unrespectable psychological phenomenon, is an integral component of a general ‘ethnocentric ideology.’ Ethnocentrism, pursued in turn, is revealed as the expression of a distinctive ‘authoritarian personality structure’ whose unadmitted needs and defenses it serves. It is to the thorough empirical elucidation of this pattern of personality organization, along lines that converge strikingly with the more speculative formulations of Erich Fromm and Jean-Paul Sartre, that the volume makes its most important contribution” (*Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1950, 45, p. 775).

I went on to sketch the emerging portrait, developed in

terms of the broadly psychoanalytic dynamic psychology that was then at its apogee:

What, then, is the authoritarian personality as it is here delineated? Briefly and inadequately, it characterizes the basically weak and dependent individual who has sacrificed his capacity for genuine experience of self and others in order to maintain a precarious order and safety. In the type case, he confronts with a façade of spurious strength a world in which rigidly stereotyped categories are substituted for the affectionate and individualized experience of which he is incapable. Such a person, estranged from inner values, lacks self-awareness and shuns intraception. His judgments are governed by a punitive conventional moralism, reflecting external standards in which he remains insecure since he has failed to make them really his own. His relations with others depend on considerations of power, success, and adjustment, in which people figure as means rather than as ends, and achievement is not valued for its own sake. In his world, the good, the powerful, and the in-group stand in fundamental opposition to the immoral, the weak, the out-group. For all that he seeks to align himself with the former, his underlying feelings of weakness and self-contempt commit him to a constant and embittered struggle to prove to himself and others that he really belongs to the strong and good. Prejudice against out-groups of all kinds and colors is a direct corollary of this personality structure [p. 776].

During the entire decade of the 1950s, research on the authoritarian personality dominated the social psychological literature (along with work on attitude change)—until it was displaced by the new experimental social psychology of “cognitive dissonance.” So strong was the focus that the ex-Frankfurt

Institute “critical theorist” T. W. Adorno, who joined the project very late in the game at the insistence of the American Jewish Committee, which was funding the research, became one of the most frequently cited names in the psychological literature (since his name came first alphabetically: “Adorno et al.”).

Unfortunately, the research of that decade dealt mainly with some serious methodological defects of only one aspect of the multifaceted work: the research developing and employing the “F Scale” of “Fascist” personal predispositions, which had the special defect, noted in my review, that all the items in the F Scale and other important pencil-and-paper measures with which it was correlated were worded in the same direction, so that agreement implied a *high* (or prejudiced, antidemocratic) score. That was most unfortunate, since the authoritarianism that the Berkeley authors intended to measure was confounded with acquiescence, the mere readiness to agree with questionnaire assertions.*

As I wrote three decades later in a disgruntled retrospective essay, “By the 1960s, interest in research on authoritarianism had flagged, and cognitive dissonance . . . carried the day. I had followed the Berkeley work with keen interest almost since its inception, so I was (and still am) deeply disappointed that the problem of authoritarianism — and more broadly, of the relation between character, social structure, and ideology — was dropped before the methodological problems that had beset the Berkeley research team had been adequately resolved, leaving the unquestionably important substantive issues hanging. This shocking failure may have helped to confirm subsequent experimental social psychology in its ahistorical, narrowly natural-science-oriented warp” (“The Shaping of American Social Psychology: A Personal Perspective from the Periphery,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1983, 9, 165–180).

In that essay, I noted that Bob Altemeyer had come up

* My subsequent research with Peace Corps volunteers helped to disentangle the distinguishable psychological meanings of authoritarianism and acquiescence. See M. Brewster Smith, “An Analysis of Two Measures of ‘Authoritarianism’ in Peace Corps Teachers,” *Journal of Personality*, 1965, 33, 513–535.

with a better measure of authoritarianism that might “allow the topic to be revived.” Indeed he had come up with such a measure. He has since revived the topic singlehanded, in this unique and important book.

Bob Altemeyer’s earlier book, *Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1981) gave a close critical review of the earlier literature and reported careful, psychometrically sophisticated developmental work validating his RWA Scale, a balanced scale measuring a narrower terrain, the results of which he conceptualized not within Freudian psychodynamics but in terms of Albert Bandura’s social learning theory. His new scale, developed over years of thoughtful testing and experimentation, was a unidimensional measure of three attitudinal clusters:

1. Authoritarian submission—a high degree of submission to the authorities who are perceived to be established and legitimate in the society in which one lives.
2. Authoritarian aggression—a general aggressiveness, directed at various persons, which is perceived to be sanctioned by established authorities.
3. Conventionalism—a high degree of adherence to the social conventions which are perceived to be endorsed by society and its established authorities [p. 148].

I found the book exciting in its conceptual inventiveness and psychometric competence (a rare combination), but at best, test development is not engrossing to most people, and books published by Canadian university presses are unlikely to catch much attention south of the Canadian border. It deserved better, but *RWA* left few ripples.

Ever since *RWA* appeared, I have kept in touch with Altemeyer. I know of no one to match him in psychology. He has carried out a stunning major research program singlehanded, in a provincial university remote from the traveled highways of

United States–dominated psychology, with minimal money and maximal brains. He has not been presenting this work at meetings of the American Psychological Association or in the Journals. *RWA* described the launching and first fruits of his program. Now, seven years later, we have in this book the full mature fruits—and they are still coming in as a product of Altemeyer's industriousness and ingenuity.

The present volume stands on its own feet: we begin with a synopsis of where *RWA* left those of us who have followed his journey from the beginning. And as readers, we are carried along with much of the thrill of a good detective story—we participate vicariously in the process of exploration. Altemeyer has avoided being ruined by the atrocious conventional norms of behavioral science writing; he has a wonderful touch for informal communication.

It would be wrong, however, to put primary emphasis on the methodological and expository example that he sets. The substantive contribution of this book is spectacular. He *has* resolved the methodological problems that buried the earlier Berkeley work. He has reinstated right-wing authoritarianism as a measurable pattern of personality that today has just as major social and political consequences as the Berkeley authors believed at midcentury. He has demonstrated many of its correlates and, in an unprecedented combination of experimental and psychometric strategies, he has thrown real light on its causes and origins and on psychologically warranted approaches to dealing with the authoritarian menace.

This is an important book, its early draft richly deserving of the Prize for Behavioral Science Research of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which it received in 1986. It should receive close attention in the social psychology programs of both psychology and sociology departments and in political psychology as an aspect of political science. Right-wing authoritarianism remains a serious threat in our political and social life. Bob Altemeyer gives us very substantial help in understanding it.

Over the years, I have used the mails to argue with Altemeyer that the Berkeley psychodynamic approach to authori-

tarianism fares better in his data than he has sometimes claimed. By now, I think we are reaching something of a rapprochement. Much (but not all) of the actual “syndrome” that I summarized in my early review is essentially supported. On balance, probably Bandura has the edge over Freud as to its origins in life experience – but Banduran social learning theory may be about as flexible, for better or worse, as Freudian psychodynamics. Certainly, in Altemeyer’s hands, it furnishes a very workable frame for the down-to-earth understanding of the dynamics of authoritarianism.

This book deserves wide attention and a long life in print. I know of no other work to match it in the usually negatively correlated qualities of psychometric sophistication, theoretical originality, and experimental ingenuity and competence. It should, at a minimum, be read by all graduate students in social psychology for the next decade. It should attract a much broader audience.

July 1988

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at Santa Cruz



Preface

The struggle to understand right-wing authoritarianism has failed as surely as our society has failed to control authoritarian influences on our lives. There is hardly a front page or a news broadcast that does not carry evidence of authoritarianism's ill-doing. But if asked, "Why do people continue to support disastrous leaders?" or "Why is there still so much hate in our society toward minorities?" or "Why do seemingly sensible, progressive attempts to deal with our social problems encounter such determined resistance?" we seldom have anything to say that was not obvious to the questioner beforehand. Moreover, we have failed to realize that, to a considerable extent, there is a single answer to these three questions and to many others as well.

We have not learned the answer because we abandoned the search, in frustration, some years ago. A massive effort to come to grips with authoritarianism was ignited by the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* in 1950. For over a decade hundreds of scientists researched far-flung fields with the Fascism Scale, and the journals fairly bulged with studies linking the "pre-Fascist personality" to almost everything imaginable. But because the underlying conceptualization was easily holed and sunk, because the F Scale was terribly flawed, and because

the studies showed an uncanny knack for contradicting one another and raising impenetrable methodological thickets, virtually nothing was accomplished in the long run. And so, one by one, investigators quietly gave up. In the mid sixties and early seventies social psychology textbooks had whole chapters on authoritarianism; today they have a paragraph, or nothing at all.

But all the problems in our culture associated with the authoritarian personality have remained, and in many respects they have grown. Ironically, they were creating headlines, and enormous internal turmoil, at the very time behavioral scientists abandoned the quest. The dateline was "Saigon." And "Washington." And "My Lai." And "Kent State."

I began my research on authoritarianism at this time and in 1981 published *Right-Wing Authoritarianism*. This book laid, in two ways, a new foundation for investigating the area: by presenting an empirically based conceptualization of authoritarianism as the covariation of authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism and by producing a relatively reliable and valid instrument for measuring this syndrome, the RWA Scale. During the seven years since, I have conducted many experiments on the reason authoritarianism is organized the way it is, the way it develops in an individual, and the ways we can control it in a democratic society. I believe these investigations, reported for the first time in the present volume, give us a much clearer understanding than we have ever had before of a very serious problem in our society.

Why "very serious"? Because my research, like that of my predecessors, has been driven by the perception that there exists a vast potential for the acceptance of right-wing totalitarian rule in countries like the United States and Canada. The findings reported in the pages that follow illustrate this potential and tell us much that we need to know to safeguard our freedoms.

I have written this book, which presents a fully scientific report of my investigations, for anyone who would understandably demand a detailed proof of such a disturbing proposition. In the main such persons would be other behavioral scientists. For persons with other backgrounds, I have provided a short,

nontechnical discussion of statistical matters in Appendix A as an aid in understanding the presentation.

Social psychologists and personality researchers will, I hope, find this report of direct and compelling interest. Our close associates, the developmental psychologists, might be intrigued by the evidence on how authoritarianism becomes part of adult character. Researchers who study intrapsychic phenomena and repression might also find this book rewarding, for understanding the authoritarian has required delving far beyond his own account of his behavior. Indeed, the techniques developed for these explorations might prove useful to investigators working in quite different areas.

In a broader vein, I understand that some behavioral scientists have assigned parts of my first book in their graduate methodology seminars, particularly when dealing with questionnaire construction and test administration—and the meta-issue of why we do research at all. I hope they will find sections of the present book worth sharing with students before the latter grab Test X and build rather pointless dissertations around it.

Researchers in other behavioral sciences might also find interesting reading within. Sociologists concerned with the organization of social attitudes, the role of such attitudes in thinking and behavior, and changes in the level of authoritarianism in society over time will find matters of concern here. Political scientists who study right-wing movements, or the interplay of personality and political party affiliation, or the way “liberal” and “conservative” forces in society find representation in legislatures should find material that holds their attention. Historians of Nazi Germany and Fascism in general might discover interconnections between the present and the past. Persons involved in the scientific study of religion should encounter many relevant findings.

Beyond these academic interests, other professionals who work in more applied settings may find the book profitable—psychotherapists engrossed with how the mind deceives itself, for example. Such readers should also be directed to the discoveries about authoritarians’ fantasies and sexual behavior and the

evidence bearing on the original psychoanalytic theory of the pre-Fascist personality.

Counselors who work with the victims of authoritarianism may find that this research can lead their clients to greater understanding of their victimization and less self-blame. Educators, in turn, may be both depressed and exhilarated by the role education plays in the development of personal authoritarianism. And professionals dedicated to social reform in general might find that this book lends insight into those most likely to oppose them and useful information on how to change these opponents' minds (or, at the minimum, avoid unnecessary backlash).

Chapter One points out how little we still know about this force that affects our lives in countless ways. It defines right-wing authoritarianism in some detail and then summarizes what we have learned so far using this new approach.

Chapter Two tells how I conducted the research to be described. It gives the latest version of the RWA Scale, along with some facts about the 20,000-plus people who have filled out this 30-item questionnaire over the past 15 years, during which time the level of authoritarianism in our society has been found to be slowly but surely rising. The importance of internal consistency in psychological tests is discussed, and the chapter closes with an account of my successes and failures at improving such consistency in typical research settings—which might prove helpful to investigators in a wide variety of fields.

Chapter Three explains how authoritarianism develops in a person. I examine the original “Berkeley theory” and develop an alternative model based on Bandura’s social learning theory. Then I present research that uncovers the importance of certain experiences in an individual’s life as keys to his adult authoritarianism. The chapter closes with two longitudinal studies of how higher education and experiences after university, such as parenthood, affect right-wing authoritarianism.

Chapter Four begins a two-chapter investigation of the most mysterious component of the authoritarian syndrome, authoritarian aggression. After reviewing the previous findings

on the authoritarian's hostility, I turn to the issue of whether *nonauthoritarians* are just as aggressive, but toward different targets. Authoritarians have "enemies lists" of despised targets. Do *nonauthoritarians* also have groups they are ready to punish as soon as they get the chance? It appears governments would have little trouble persuading authoritarians to help hunt down and persecute Communists and homosexuals. Would *nonauthoritarians* respond as quickly to a call to persecute the Ku Klux Klan? Three theoretical explanations of authoritarian aggression are then considered: the classic "Berkeley" psychoanalytic model, one based on social learning theory, and that provided by the frustration-aggression hypothesis.

Chapter Five presents findings on each of the three explanations advanced in Chapter Four and then reports four pitting experiments that compared the most promising hypotheses' ability to explain various kinds of authoritarian aggression. A simple, powerful explanation emerges from these studies. The chapter ends with research on the authoritarian's awareness of his or her hostility, and on how the authoritarian maintains a righteous self-image while being prejudiced and aggressive.

Chapter Six studies the connections between religion and right-wing authoritarianism. Evidence of a mutually supporting relationship emerges, along with an explanation of why some religions produce greater levels of authoritarianism in their members than others. I then explore the authoritarian's religious beliefs and practices in depth and describe three experiments bearing on the "compartmentalized" minds of religious authoritarians.

In Chapter Seven I review evidence that authoritarianism is increasingly associated with political party preference as interest in politics rises. The chapter reports my studies of RWA Scale scores among politicians in four Canadian provincial and four American state legislatures—studies that led me to conclude that personal authoritarianism probably differentiates politicians more highly than any other ideological factor. Some very high relationships between party affiliation and authoritarianism are also described. The chapter closes by consid-

ering the implications of the accumulated research with the RWA Scale on whether there is an “authoritarian on the left.”

Chapter Eight presents ways right-wing authoritarianism can be better controlled in a democratic society. I offer several proposals for steps that educators, the news media, and religious leaders might take toward moderating personal authoritarianism in our society. I also describe experiments on the use of laws to control authoritarianism, ways to limit the appeal of future demagogues, how to effect social change without raising the level of Fascist potential in society, and how to use social norms and self-insight to reduce personal authoritarianism.

A final chapter entitled “Afterthoughts” summarizes the major findings in the book and considers what they mean for the behavioral sciences. It ends with the observation that the academic community has as much at stake in the control of authoritarianism as any other group, and probably more.

Winnipeg
July 1988

Bob Altemeyer



Acknowledgments

I did not anticipate the extent to which my first book, *Right-Wing Authoritarianism*, would create interest in me as a person. Many people, about three as I recall, have asked questions over the past seven years about me and my research program. I'll answer them now, once and for all.

One person, visiting our department for a job interview, asked, "How did you become interested in whatever it is you study?" The answer is, I have had a lifelong commitment to democracy. I also failed a question on my Ph.D. candidacy exams, thoughtfully asked by Daryl Bem, about response sets and the Berkeley research program — neither of which I had ever heard of. That led to a redemptive paper on the subject and a subsequent interest that would warm the cockles of Alfred Adler's heart. This book could easily be retitled *Right-Wing Authoritarianism: A Case Study in Overcompensation*.

Second, a Freudian who had heard of the RWA Scale asked me whether my middle name was William or Winfred. He suspected I had unconsciously named the test after myself, as in Robert William Altemeyer. I found this quite ingenious, because I have always wished my middle name were Walter. Actually,