CHAPTER 9

Conclusion—The Milgram-Holocaust Linkage and Beyond

This book set out by asking a question that has perplexed Holocaust historians for many years: How did an only moderately antisemitic society in Germany end up killing millions of European Jews? I suggested one way to shed new light on this question might be to explore Stanley Milgram's Obedience studies, concentrating particularly on their invention. I reasoned that Milgram's invention of his experiments and the Nazis' invention of the Holocaust share a key similarity: Both successfully transformed large numbers of "ordinary" and arguably indifferent people into willing inflictors of harm. Therefore, if it were possible to delineate Milgram's start-to-finish journey in transforming most of his participants into inflictors of harm *on a likeable person*, perhaps my findings might offer some insight into how *only moderately antisemitic* Germans so quickly became willing executioners. Volume 1 revealed that when inventing and then collecting his data, Milgram relied heavily on formally rational techniques of discovery and organization.

In terms of the invention of the Obedience experiments, after hearing many Nazi war criminals plead that during the Holocaust they only followed higher orders, Milgram wondered if ordinary people in a social psychology experiment would also follow orders to inflict harm on an innocent person. He set out with a preconceived goal: run a harm-inflicting experiment that would "maximize obedience…" Because Milgram did not have a procedure capable of generating such a result, he had to invent one. Then, relying on forces he suspected caused the Holocaust—Nazi-like pledges of loyalty, strict obedience to harmful

orders, and little steps toward a radical outcome—he envisioned a rather rudimentary basic experimental procedure where participants accepted a pledge to obey orders to engage in an escalating physical assault. Soon realizing this idea would unlikely achieve his goal to maximize obedience, Milgram started applying his intuitive feel and drew on his previous experiences as a social psychologist to envision what he thought might better move him toward preconceived goal achievement. Two key innovations emerged: Instead of a physical assault, Milgram sensed participants might more likely inflict "harm" if they were instructed to deploy fake shocks from an emotionally and physically distancing electrical device (effectively substituting human labor with a more predictable, controllable, calculable, and efficient source of non-human technology). Also, he envisioned a more efficacious institutional justification for inflicting the shocks: By hurting the learner, the participant would help establish whether or not punishment improved learning. Rather powerfully, this procedural change morally inverted the infliction of harm on an innocent person into a commendable social good.

Although this emerging procedure started to appear a little less like the Holocaust captured in the laboratory setting, to test its potential to achieve his desired end result, Milgram had his students run a series of pilot studies. Not only did the first pilots demonstrate the basic research idea held enormous potential—about 60% of participants inflicted every shock—Milgram also observed them engage in unanticipated behaviors that inspired new procedural innovations that he thought might move him even closer to converting his preconceived goal into a reality. Importantly, these improvements were beyond his intuitive feel and past experiences of what he imagined might generate a high completion rate. For example, in the first pilot series participants could see an outline of the learner through a translucent screen. For many participants, the image of a pained learner clearly caused discomfort—seeing a connection between cause and effect likely made them feel too personally responsible for their actions. To Milgram's surprise, however, some of the distressed participants resolved the weighty dilemma before them by turning away from the pained learner and then continued to inflict further shocks. Thus, instead of Milgram from the *top-down* adding his own manipulative innovations to the basic procedure, these participants from the *bottom-up* invented their own such techniques. Inadvertently, these self-initiated actions helped move Milgram toward preconceived goal achievement. They did so because when some participants turned

away from the pained learner, Milgram's observation of this behavior caused him to wonder if introducing a solid wall to subsequent pilots might cause the completion rate to increase beyond 60%. If Milgram was right, then introducing a wall into the standard procedure would bring him even closer to goal achievement. Milgram's suspicions proved correct: During the next pilots, a wall was introduced and in the final trial run termed the Truly Remote Pilot, "virtually all" participants inflicted every shock asked of them. This trial saw Milgram achieve his preconceived goal and signaled that he was finally ready to run his first official baseline—an experiment he was confident would obtain a surprisingly high completion rate.

Thus, with time the "rules and regulations" surrounding Milgram's gradually improving procedure became the most efficient and predictable "one best way" for the experimenter (an actor) to control participants into doing what he (Milgram) wanted: to (ostensibly) inflict harm on an innocent person. And it was *past history*—Milgram's intuitive feel, past experiences, and close observations of the pilot studies—that had, through a process of trial-and-error discovery, gradually led him to a procedure that could push and pull nearly all into doing what he wanted. If he wanted to achieve his preconceived goal during the first official baseline condition, all Milgram's helpers—research assistants, actors, *and* participants—just needed to follow his latest and most effective "rules and regulations."[1] This, I would argue, was the rationally driven and somewhat circuitous learning process that guided Milgram toward the invention of his "one best way" to preconceived goal achievement.

The key to the success of the Obedience research was that, as best illustrated by the Truly Remote Pilot, every specialist task across the study's organizational chain—from the National Science Foundation funders, the participant "processing" team, to the shock-inflicting participants—felt or appeared sufficiently banal and thus adequately devoid of personal responsibility for any harm inflicted. It was critical that every functionary involved came to suspect that, because of the division of labor inherent within any bureaucratic process, all could blame someone else for their morally dubious yet personally (financially, materially, and/ or socially) beneficial contributions to a harmful process. All needed to suspect that they could contribute to the infliction of intense stress or, in the case of the participants, physical harm with probable impunity. None could feel and appear to be most responsible. Such conditions made it

much easier for Milgram (and the experimenter) to persuade, tempt, and (if needed) coerce all helpers into fulfilling their specialist role.

In summary, Milgram's biggest leaps toward goal achievement came after he substituted a Nazi-like pledge to obey with the socially more acceptable pursuit of "scientific" discovery and a direct physical assault with the non-human technology of the "shock" machine, introduced the non-human technology of a wall, and (inadvertently) constructed the non-human participant-processing technology of bureaucracy. These innovations, in particular, ensured that by the time Milgram ran his first official baseline condition, most ordinary people at the end of his participant-processing assembly line willingly inflicted "harm" on an innocent person. During the invention of the baseline experiment, it is therefore fair to conclude, firstly, that Milgram behaved less like a social scientist and more like a goal-orientated project manager trying to socially engineer a preconceived result. Secondly, Weberian formally rational techniques of discovery, organization, and non-human technologies played a central role in the invention and production of the Obedience study's surprising results.

In Volume 2 of this book, I illustrated how certain innovators within the Nazi regime relied on the same Milgram-like formally rational techniques of discovery and non-human organizational technologies to achieve their preconceived goals. This shared reliance on Weberian formal rationality, I argue, forms the most important Milgram-Holocaust linkage—it played *the* key role in transforming so many ordinary and only moderately antisemitic Germans into willing inflictors of harm.

Inspired by the extermination of Indigenous North Americans and Armenians, Hitler rationally drew on past experience and an intuitive feel to envision initially rudimentary strategies of eliminating German and later European Jews—a group whom despised. Throughout the 1930s, however, there was neither a strategy, nor the organizational infrastructure or technology—*no procedure*—to render the German state capable of exterminating such massive numbers of mostly women and children. Despite the Nazis' unrelenting and intensifying propaganda campaign, which morally inverted the removal of all Jews from the Reich into a social good, Hitler's personal preference remained unachievable. As a result, the Führer moved on to other apparently more realistic solutions to his most urgent problem—the Jews were to be shipped to Madagascar.

It could be argued that Hitler's desire, in conjunction with ordinary Germans' increasing capability to kill fairly large numbers of civilians

after September 1939, stimulated a rational search for a technically feasible method of extermination. And, as apparently more realistic solutions like deportation were rendered unrealistic, powerful, and ambitious, project managers like Himmler and Heydrich started to sense merit in the once unrealistic solution of extermination—particularly mass shooting. The invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 offered a unique opportunity to pilot test various shooting techniques that at least aimed to work toward the so-called Führer's wish. Despite some "promising" discoveries and "auspicious" results by innovators like Jäger and especially Jeckeln that interactively (from both top-down and bottom-up forces within the execution hierarchy) emerged with increasing time and observational experience, major limitations remained with firearms as a means of mass extermination. Not least of which was that ordinary German executioners were forced to witness an undeniable connection between their causal contributions and the lethal effects. That is, guns made those most directly involved feel and appear too responsible for their actions. Little or no responsibility ambiguity remained at the last link in the organizational chain (just as Milgram would later discover). The resulting responsibility clarity often stimulated intense feelings of guilt and, most commonly, repugnance. Thus, Himmler (like Milgram) concluded that another way had to be found.

As this realization settled in, innovators across the organizational machinery of destruction independently pursued other exploratory pilot studies, trialing the viability of potentially more compartmentalized yet efficient killing techniques that could be attached to the last link in Eichmann's people-moving organizational process. The most "successful" of these killing experiments involved different logistical and technical means of gassing civilians. Over time, and building on previous experience (particularly the T4 Euthanasia project), certain front line innovators made increasingly destructive discoveries—Lange's gas vans at Chełmno, Wirth during Operation Reinhard, and finally Höss and his men at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Indeed, when Höss's advanced, highly efficient, relatively impersonal and apparently more "humane," gassing and body-incineration technique was attached as the last link in Eichmann's people-moving chain, ambiguity over responsibility for the end result increased, rendering frontline German perpetrators largely unaffected by their contributions (especially considering Jewish prisoners disposed of the victims' bodies). Consequently, the violent capabilities of German executioners in

places like Auschwitz increased enormously. Unlike the shooting squads who sometimes balked over killing certain types of victims, Höss's men showed an uncanny ability to kill without complaint truly massive numbers of civilians: Gypsies, Reich Jews, the elderly, mentally ill, women, children, even babies.

Throughout, this journey of discovery achieved sustained increases across all four of Ritzer's components of a formally rational system. This pattern was particularly evident as less predictable human labor was substituted for more controlling, predictable, calculable, and efficient non-human technologies. I therefore argue that the Nazi regime gradually evolved an ever-improving formally rational genocidal infrastructure, which, lying behind the executioners' individual actions, greatly contributed to the destructive end result. With time, the Nazis discovered that (much like with the Truly Remote Pilot) the less the touching, seeing, and hearing associated with harm infliction, the greater the "banality of evil" at the last, *and thus every*, point along the genocidal chain. And the more "banal" the process felt and appeared to all those involved, the more ambiguous the issue of responsibility and, as a result, the easier it became for authority figures (even peers) to persuade, tempt, and coerce ordinary and *only* moderately antisemitic Germans into killing. At each link across the organizational chain, every functionary helper had to be able to blame someone or something else as more responsible for their harmful contributions to the process—thus, the theory of responsibility ambiguity.[2] It is here that I believe we find the answer to Bauer's "real question" of how so many only moderately antisemitic Germans were quickly converted into willing executioners. Moreover, it is here that we come to recognize what Milgram actually uncovered in his laboratory— not people "just following orders" but the deployment of an inherently problem-solving, malevolent organizational process that—from the top-down *and* bottom-up—socially engineered the leadership's preferred preconceived goal into a terrifying reality.

Theories proclaiming, as I just have, a strong Milgram-Holocaust linkage have, however, been vigorously critiqued in the more contemporary literature, largely because the Obedience studies have been shown to conflict in many ways with the Holocaust's finer historical details. Indeed, the current consensus in the Obedience studies literature is that Milgram's research provides few, if any, insights into how during the Holocaust the undoable became doable. Consequently, all attempts to advance linkages between the Obedience studies and the

Holocaust—including Milgram's own—have encountered stern criticism. Lutsky perhaps best summarizes these authors' criticisms when they dismiss all previous attempts to link the perpetration of the Holocaust with Milgram's experiments: "What an emphasis on obedience slights, however, are *voluntary individual and group contributions to Nazi ideology, policy, bureaucracy, technology, and ultimately, inhumanity*" [italics added].[3] As I've shown, however, the Obedience studies were not about obedience *per se*, which (despite Milgram's beliefs) constituted more of an excuse that helped participants displace elsewhere responsibility for their actions. Instead, as the last three chapters of Volume 1 illustrate, the "Obedience" studies actually revealed the impact of voluntary individual and group contributions to an (albeit scientific) ideology, goal-orientated organizational policy (maximizing the completion rate), coercive bureaucracy, and strain resolving technology. And in Milgram's laboratory, I argue that all these factors contributed enormously to the generation of inhumane behavior. So in conflict with the present consensus even among Milgram's strongest advocates that the Obedience studies have at best only minor explanatory power when applied to the Holocaust, I suggest this primary similarity (formal rationality) advances a strong Milgram-Holocaust linkage along new lines.

To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that Milgram accurately simulated the Holocaust in the laboratory setting. To ensure his baseline procedure was both workable and capable of achieving a high completion rate, Milgram frequently added his own (non-Holocaust-related) strain resolving and binding techniques (e.g., his substituting the "pledge to obey" with the infliction of harm in the name of science). Major differences like this, however, mean that my list of commonalities between the Obedience studies and the Holocaust itself could be invalidated by an equal and perhaps even longer list of differences in historical facts. Milgram himself faced such criticism. Despite advancing numerous and initially convincing linkages, his critics were quick to remind him that *unlike* his experiments, German perpetrators were exposed to an intense propaganda campaign, despised their victims, acted with enthusiasm, volunteered to harm their victims, engaged in excesses, and afterward rarely expressed remorse. In short, my critics could also argue that much like Milgram, I too have fallen prey to the Conformation Bias: The tendency to only present evidence that confirms my preconceived beliefs (my above Milgram-Holocaust linkages), followed by a failure to mention any conflicting facts.

There is, in fact, one historical difference between Milgram's participants and the Nazi executioners that, perhaps more than any other, conflicts sharply with my Milgram-Holocaust linkage. That is, most Germans who refused to, for example, shoot Jews did so because of sheer physical revulsion.[4] Nearly all of Milgram's participants, on the other hand, refused to harm their victim on *ethical* grounds: "I don't think it's right."[5] Thus, before Milgram's participants and Hitler's executioners decided whether or not to harm another person, *there was a moral dimension inherent in the former's dilemma that was absent from the latter's.*[6] Put simply, Milgram's participants and Hitler's ordinary Germans were faced with resolving a completely different type of dilemma, thus generating at the base of their respective decision-making process a foundational difference in kind and not degree. Because of this substantive difference, it could be argued that the Holocaust and the Obedience studies are incomparable events, therefore invalidating all attempts to advance any Milgram-Holocaust linkage. As logically compelling as this argument might sound, I disagree.

Instead, I suspect the Obedience studies and the Holocaust share a *certain* commonality that is so important that it is capable of negating the technical historical differences that separate them. That is, both Milgram and the most "successful" Nazi innovators applied formally rational techniques of discovery, bureaucratic organization, and other non-human technologies to overcome any obstacles that got in the way of goal achievement. For example, during Operation Barbarossa, Himmler's goal was for his men to shoot every Jewish person they encountered. Initially, however, many Germans struggled and even refused to shoot all Jews because they found it revolting. Consequently, certain Nazi innovators used rational techniques of discovery, organizational processes, and other non-human technologies in an attempt to scale this obstacle interfering with goal achievement. Milgram, on the other hand, had a conceptually similar although technically different goal: to ensure that most participants inflicted excruciating "shocks" on an innocent person, thus maximizing his baseline experiment's completion rate. However, during the pilot studies, many of Milgram's participants refused to shock the learner because they thought it was unethical to do so. As shown, Milgram used rational techniques of discovery, organizational processes, and other non-human technologies to scale this obstacle interfering with goal achievement. Therefore, it may not matter that different obstacles were encountered—or even different paths

pursued—during their quest to arrive at similar (although technically different) destinations. What is most important is that both Milgram and the most "successful" Nazi innovators used the same formally rational tools—techniques of discovery, organizational processes, and other non-human technologies—to find a way—*any way*—of arriving at goal achievement.[7] And with more time and greater experience, the most innovative among them found increasingly more efficient, predictable, calculable, and controlling solutions. Thus, again, the single most important Milgram-Holocaust linkage of all is Weberian formal rationality.

Because basically all people in contemporary society rely on formally rational problem-solving techniques for personal goal achievement, could it not be argued that the generalization of my above conclusion is rather useless because it could be shaped to explain just about any malevolent social outcome? While we all may rely on formal rationality, it is important to note that only the most powerful people in society are able to use it as a tool to achieve macrocosmic goals that can, on a grand scale, adversely affect the lives of many other beings. Only the powerful have the wherewithal to procure the services of an army of problem-solving specialist helpers, to build enormous bureaucratic organizations, and to source and then insert other efficacious non-human technologies. In fact, it could be argued that the powerful are so because, more than others, they have the resources to deploy the most effective formally rational tools with which to try to secure their large-scale personal goals. Milgram (as a fully funded professor at Yale University) and the Nazi leadership are examples of such powerful people. Well-resourced government and corporate leaders, along with particularly persuasive individuals, are other examples. Armed with preconceived goals, these societal leaders are more capable of securing the help and expertize of a second group, less powerful functionaries, who fill specialist organizational posts across an emerging division of labor. This second group has (with varying degrees) some power because they too have a choice, albeit a more modest one, to either agree or refuse to help the powerful achieve their preconceived goals. It is a modest choice because, as we have seen, the powerful often have top-down means of motivating—pushing and pulling—helpers into doing what they want. Examples of this second group include Milgram's research assistants, his actors and, had the experiment been real, the participants (all of whom had the choice to refuse or agree to perform their specialist roles in the wider organizational process). During the Holocaust, this second group included all of those Germans below

the Nazi leadership—those working within the perpetrator infrastructure, along with the consenting or indifferent German public. Other examples include functionary bureaucrats working in government or corporate posts. And the way the powerful use specialist helpers within a problem-solving bureaucratic organization can indirectly or directly cost a third group, the powerless, dearly, as happened both in the Obedience studies and in the Holocaust. The powerless are those whom the choices of the powerful leave, for the most part, without any choice at all. Examples include, again had the Obedience studies been real, the learner, the Jews, and other civilian victims of Nazi hegemony.

So, it could be argued that in the case of both the Holocaust and the Obedience studies the powerful used the expertize of functionary helpers, access to bureaucratic organization, and other non-human technologies to advance their own self-interests and did so at the expense of the powerless. Thus, if we assume that during the Obedience studies the learner was genuinely harmed, what Milgram captured in the laboratory setting was the application of goal-directed formal rationality by the powerful as a means of devising an unequal social structure from which, at enormous cost to the powerless, the powerful ultimately benefited. And because the powerless can do little to resist predation, the Obedience studies captured in the laboratory the use and abuse of formal rationality as a self-serving and unethical tool of power, oppression, and inequality. And when viewed through this lens, what the Obedience studies actually captured on a relatively small scale, as other scholars of Milgram's research have long suggested, can be generalized to the Holocaust, as well as to multiple other examples of organizational malevolence so common in modern society.

Consider the following examples wherein to achieve their own personal "Rational Goal/s" and extend their power, financial/business, political, and/or social leaders (the "Powerful") have applied the tool of formal rationality—bureaucracy—to achieve their personally beneficial goals, which, in some shape or form, directly or indirectly generated an "Externality" paid for by the "Powerless" (Table 9.1).

Much like in the Obedience studies, powerful people constructed/maintained the above organizations by offering functionary helpers some kind of personal benefit in exchange for their participation (typically in the form of financial reimbursement, non-financial benefits, prestige, or job security). Because it is in their interests to do so, most functionaries

Table 9.1 Some destructive organizational processes in modern society

Powerful	Rational goal/s	Externality	Powerless
Law and order politicians	Maintain capital punishment (pleasing "law and order" voters, and thus perpetuating the term these politicians serve in office)	Wrongful executions	Wrongfully convicted and executed prisoners
Dow Chemical Company	Profit maximization obtained through low labor costs and unsafe (inexpensive) working conditions	Bhopal gas disaster	People of Bhopal
USA and UK governments	Pursuing an illegal war—the Invasion of Iraq	Civilian causalities	People of Iraq
Canadian government	Profit maximization (by selling military weapons to violators of human rights laws like the Saudi Arabian government/ monarchy)	Civilian casualties	Civilian dissidents of the Saudi Arabian government/monarchy
Joe Fresh/J.C. Penney	Profit maximization (by using inhumane sweatshop labor working in unsafe working conditions)	Collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory	Impoverished sweatshop laborers in Bangladesh
Ford Motor Company	Profit maximization (by knowingly selling a faulty and dangerous product)	Pinto cars occasionally exploding causing driver and passenger casualties	Lower socioeconomic car buyers in the USA
Tyson Foods	Profit maximization (by way of efficient industrialized factory farming processes)	Cruel processing systems	Cattle
Joseph Stalin and the Soviet government authorities	Forcefully collecting and then diverting the Ukrainian grain harvest to the rest of the Soviet Union/satellite states	Mass starvation	People of Ukraine

naturally accept the offer. When, as in all the above examples, a full contingent of specialists agree to fulfill their roles, their collective actions immediately or eventually end up directly or indirectly costing a particular powerless group dearly. The division of labor, along with other avoidance-enabling non-human technologies, allows the powerful and their specialist helpers to avoid directly experiencing (or be affected by) the

potentially disturbing perceptual consequences that their contributions end up having on the powerless.

Beyond the division of labor, an important non-human technology relied upon by many of the powerful and their functionary helpers in the above examples was geographical distance (the harm occurred far away in the sweatshop factory, on the mysterious kill floor, somewhere in the Middle East or Soviet hinterland). For powerful people and their specialist functionaries, however, this kind of structural compartmentalization detracts from their level of awareness. And this lack of awareness, coupled by the involvement of many functionary contributors, can, as mentioned, stimulate "responsibility ambiguity": general confusion over who is totally, mostly, partially, or not at all responsible for a harmful end result. The presence of responsibility ambiguity across a totally compartmentalized organizational chain (much like the Truly Remote Pilot) can, as mentioned in Volume 1, encourage the emergence of two types of functionaries. The first type of functionary can make their eventually harmful contributions to the wider process because they are genuinely unaware of and do not realize the consequences of their actions (e.g., the technician who built Milgram's shock machine, but presumably never saw what Milgram did with it). Compartmentalization and responsibility ambiguity throughout an organizational chain can, however, also encourage the emergence of a second type of functionary. Quite differently, this second type of functionary comes to sense opportunity amid the confusion: Despite secretly knowing (in concept) about the negative effects their contributions will have on the powerless, they nonetheless sense that they can continue contributing to, and personally benefiting from, the infliction of harm on the powerless safe in the knowledge that they can probably do so with impunity (e.g., Milgram who publicly claimed he believed his experiments were harmless, but just in case they weren't, he earlier also attempted to protect himself by ensuring all participants signed a legal waiver). This second type of functionary can probably act with impunity because should, in the unlikely case, they ever be held to account for making their contributions, they know that thanks to compartmentalization, they can (disingenuously) claim to have been the first type of functionary: They were (apparently) unaware of the harmful consequences of their actions. And if that doesn't work, they can simply blame someone else as more responsible than themselves or diffuse (dilute) personal responsibility across all the other contributors. This organizational loophole exists because the presence of other

contributors and various avoidance-promoting non-human technologies makes denying responsibility easy and localizing it difficult. Thus, bureaucratic organization provides a fertile environment for a metaphorical haze or fog to rather conveniently descend over the issue of awareness and responsibility. So, even when the powerful and their functionary helpers know (in concept) that their collective contributions to goal achievement will end up directly or indirectly costing some powerless group dearly, because they appear or feel sufficiently "covered," many are willing to prioritize their relatively trivial desires (salaries, enormous profits, employee benefits, promotions, medals, prestige, and other perks), over the more important needs of the powerless (avoiding death, illness, and misery).[8]

In fact, the wider organizational structures surrounding helpers actually discourage them from doing otherwise because the system is geared toward ensuring that engaging in wrongdoing is easy and convenient, and resisting unethical goal achievement is both difficult and personally burdensome (as whistle-blowers and resisters—a third type of bureaucrat—in some of the above examples know only too well). Thus, formal rationality, as Milgram inadvertently illustrated on a relatively microcosmic scale, can be a very effective tool for the powerful and their functionary helpers to pursue a personally beneficial yet iniquitous organizational goal. And within that organizational system, it is the inherent murkiness surrounding the issue of awareness and responsibility that enables all involved to abuse their greater power with probable impunity.

The "powerful" and their helpers in the above examples would likely dispute my associating their behavior with that of Milgram and his helpers during the Obedience studies, and especially with what I hope contributes to a better understanding of the Holocaust. Their intentions, they would no doubt argue, were to variously protect their electorates from murderous criminals, generate jobs in a poor Indian city, bring freedom to Iraqis living under tyranny, promote international trade with an ally, generate jobs in a poor Bangladeshi city, produce affordable cars for struggling Americans, supply affordable food to all Americans, and distribute grain fairly throughout a union. However, two points should be kept in mind. First, it is the powerful who control the initial framing of their rational goals—the powerful control the script and have an influential say in socially constructing their formally rational goal/s as a moral "good." Consequently, they have the power to present goal

achievement to their functionary helpers (and potential critics) in the form of a noble task (as Milgram did). And in a "yes-man" functionary environment, where all helpers are likely to personally benefit in some way, who is going to challenge the boss's account? Although the powerful may genuinely believe their goals to be noble, it is rare that they do not have vested interests in their own success. Milgram, for example, likely believed in all earnestness that his experiments would provide new insights into how the Nazis perpetrated the Holocaust. But at the same time, he also seems to have sensed that whether or not his experiments achieved this outcome, he would benefit financially and professionally from his conversion of innocent people into stuttering wrecks. And because Milgram was in a relatively stronger position of power, he also knew there was probably nothing his "subjects" could do about it—recalling the unemployed Fred Prozi's undisguised starring role in Milgram's documentary, despite Prozi's reservations about his face being shown, as he said, "nationwide or something…"[9] Milgram assured him the video recording would only be shown to psychologists. What Milgram failed to anticipate was that after publishing his first baseline experiment, someone with equal or even greater power might come after him. Indeed, a year after this publication, Berkeley University's Diana Baumrind attacked Milgram with her searing ethical critique and the then untenured Milgram thereafter failed, in another broken promise, to publish the results of his incomparably unethical Relationship condition. Ironically, Milgram's Asch Conformity experiment-like actions to "conceal" this "purely private" "secret" arguably revealed the order of his priorities: His academic career came before the dissemination of scientific knowledge—results that might reveal insights into the Holocaust. The powerful may espouse grand and what they believe to be moral intentions (much as Hitler did in his quest to bring Germany to greatness), but would an independent audience (with no vested interest in goal achievement) come to the same conclusion? And if the goal is indeed so grand and noble, would the powerful continue perceiving that goal as a moral good if they suddenly found themselves in the position of the powerless?

Although the comparison is far from perfect in every case, each of the examples in the above table involves formally rational decision-making as a means of bringing about a predetermined end, in which functionary helpers used techniques of discovery, bureaucratic organization, and other non-human technologies to find the one best way of overcoming

any obstacles impeding goal achievement. And thus, they all share key elements with the Obedience studies: a division of labor, responsibility ambiguity, displacement/diffusion of responsibility, bureaucratic momentum, moral disengagement, perceptual avoidance for all or most links in the organizational chain, self-interested benefits, and, because of the disparity in power inherent to their iniquitous systems, the option for all to contribute to goal achievement with probable impunity.

Making contributions to iniquitous systems rarely feels all that bad to those involved because engaging in wrongdoing becomes normative—everyone around them is doing it. And in such an environment, anybody with any power is unlikely to draw critical attention to the iniquity experienced by powerless groups, because they in some way are likely benefiting from that inequity. All therefore have a vested interest in maintaining a consensual silence. Should anyone feel a pinch of guilt, they can remind themselves of the boss's morally inverted noble cause. And should any outsider mention the things that all would prefer, for personal comfort, remain unsaid—whistle-blowers, activists, investigative journalists, regulatory watchdogs—all functionaries can self-invent their own whitewashing and guilt-neutralizing coping mechanisms: "I'm just following orders, what can I do?" "I'm just trying to make ends meet," and in a brutal world sometimes "shit happens" (but mysteriously rarely to me).

It is for these reasons that I believe formal rationality provides the most compelling way to generalize Milgram's laboratory findings to the outside world. Milgram himself sensed this connection, arguing that bureaucratic organization was perhaps "the most common characteristic of socially organized evil in modern society."[10] It is even tempting to go a little further and argue that what the Obedience experiments captured on a relatively small scale is the cold, calculated, and ignominious abuse of power that has become common practice in our increasingly unequal neoliberal societies wherein, with the time and necessary experience to find the "one best way" to goal achievement, the powerful can implement ever more efficient, predictable, calculable, controlling ways to advance their own interests, while the poor (and now increasingly middle class) must suffer the consequences. This is a point worth pondering when one considers the popularity of neoliberalism among social elites—free international trade, increasing privatization, strong property rights, deregulation, fiscal austerity, and the promise of so-called trickle-down wealth advancing the well-being of all peoples. All that seems

to have objectively increased, however, is income inequality.[11] No wonder after World War Two German war criminals fitted back so quickly and easily into contemporary society: This was exactly the kind of iniquitous political system the Nazi leadership took to unnatural extremes. It is almost tempting to argue the Nazis were quite simply ahead of their time. As Omer Bartov uncomfortably reminds us, "…Western representations of the Holocaust fail to recognize that this extreme instance of industrial killing was generated by a society, economic system, and civilization of which our contemporary society is a direct continuation."[12]

Formal rationality is so applicable to modern life that it extends to what are probably the two greatest threats to life on earth today: nuclear holocaust and climate catastrophe.[13] In terms of the first, just before the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, Raul Hilberg ominously alluded to the new world powers' formally rational pursuit of what is a far more efficient, predictable, calculable, and controlling method of genocide than Auschwitz's gassing system:

> The bureaucrat of tomorrow… is better equipped than the German Nazis were. Killing is not as difficult as it used to be. The modern administrative apparatus has facilities for rapid, concerted movements and for efficient massive killings. These devices not only trap a larger number of victims; they also require a greater degree of specialization, and with that division of labor the moral burden too is fragmented among the participants. The perpetrator can now kill his victims without touching them, without hearing them, without seeing them.[14]

It is certain that at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, neither the American nor the Soviet leadership would have had any difficulty in finding bureaucratic compliance with commands to push the buttons that would have killed tens, perhaps hundreds, of millions of civilians.[15]

The moral dilemma at the end of the Obedience studies' organizational chain may not sit perfectly with the Holocaust. But it may fit better with what is arguably the second other greatest threat to life on earth: climate catastrophe.[16] In our "golden age of low-cost energy,"[17] greenhouse gas emissions are the consequence of worldwide economic and population growth. But for some time now the scientific community has warned increasing carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, and methane emissions, and the higher global temperatures they cause, will precipitate a worldwide environmental catastrophe. Independent audiences (those

without any vested interests) presented with this moral dilemma would very likely conclude that choosing to increase instead of significantly decreasing greenhouse gas emissions would be the morally wrong course of action. So is it possible that, given worldwide greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase despite much talk of "planned reductions," humankind has started to fall into an insidiously regressive and seemingly inescapable Milgram-like trap? Certainly, it seems that almost no one among the most powerful—Security Council politicians, Fortune 500 CEOs, rank-and-file (functionary) corporate/government employees, the middle and working classes, developed world consumers, investors, and voters—are prepared to address the issue seriously. Collectively, we refuse to sincerely confront an issue likely to bring about "civilization collapse" because of what are perceived to be far more pressing, immediate, interests—the promise of a higher standard of living, greater economic growth, more jobs, and the prioritization of convenience over sustainability. As Jarod Diamond convincingly argues, the risk of societal collapse increases when "there's a conflict of interest between the short-term interests of the decision-making elites and the long-term interests of the society as a whole, especially if the elites are able to insulate themselves from the consequences of their actions. Where what's good in the short term for the elite is bad for the society as a whole, there's a real risk of the elite doing things that will bring society down."[18] As we climb the metaphorical carbon parts per million (ppm) "shock board"—320 ppm in 1965; 330 ppm in 1975; 345 ppm in 1985; 360 ppm in 1995; 380 ppm in 2005; 400 ppm in 2015[19]—is it possible we have already entered the Obedience study's dreaded post-capitulation phase where no one breaks off? Do we refuse to reduce our carbon footprint because secretly we all know that across the oil economy's division of labor there is always someone else to blame for our personally beneficial yet eventually destructive contributions to the wider process? Those ultimately responsible for climate catastrophe can disappear because developed world consumers can blame weak government, government can blame intransigent voters, corporations can blame insatiable consumer demand, and developed world citizens can blame greedy corporations. And do we also continue to do nothing (except assiduously contribute to and benefit from climate catastrophe) because privately we all know that by the time life on earth starts getting really nasty—say by 2100 when southern Spain has turned into a desert—we'll all be dead.[20] That is, is the cause of our inaction that we all secretly know we are unlikely to become

victims—this is only going to be a real problem for our descendants—thus freeing us to act with impunity? Climate catastrophe—along with the national debt, oceans of plastic, polluted "fracked" groundwater—is what our children will inherit from us.

When I think about climate catastrophe, I cannot help sense a connection between developed world peoples and Germans who lived in, and benefited from, the Nazi regime. This is, for me, inadvertently best captured by Götz Aly. At the start of his fascinating book *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, racial war and the Nazi welfare state*, he points out that what he discovered:

> belies the optimistic conviction that we today would have behaved much better than the average person did back then. Readers of these pages will encounter not Nazi monsters but rather people who are not as different from us as we might like them to be. The culprits here are people striving for prosperity and material security for themselves and their children. They are people dreaming of owning a house with a garden, of buying a car of their own, or of taking a vacation. And they are people not tremendously interested in the potential costs of their short-term welfare to their neighbors or to future generations.[21]

Clearly, we, as links in this chain of destruction, are *all* responsible for our harmful contributions, and thus every one of us must shoulder the obligation to do our fair bit to substantively reduce our carbon footprints. This is true, but one important caveat remains. When it comes to climate catastrophe, it is the most powerful people—like the "carbon capital elite"[22]—and the organizational infrastructures they control that have the greatest chance of encouraging—instead of furtively blocking—progressive change. For example, although across the late 1970s to the mid-1980s Exxon scientists, managers, and executives developed a "sophisticated understanding of the potential effects of rising CO_2 concentrations,"[23] for some years after this awareness—particularly under the leadership of Lee Raymond and Rex Tillerson—one of the world's largest oil companies,

> …ExxonMobil has embarked on a deliberate campaign of confusion and disinformation producing a counter-science to manufacture public uncertainty by funding a diffuse network of ideologically driven advocacy organizations, as well as other issues management, public relations, lobbying, and legal tactics.[24]

Yet in light of this "broadly successful"[25] attempt to manipulate and control the social and informational field in favor of the oil industry's self-interested desires, Tillerson, who strongly supports extracting the Arctic's now (thanks to climate catastrophe) increasingly accessible vast oil reserves,[26] then has the nerve to blame climate catastrophe on international consumers and their demand for more oil: "It's back to that insatiable appetite that the world has for energy. Oil demand is going to continue to grow."[27] So Tillerson has actively attempted to manipulate public opinion to the point it aligns with his own self-interested desires, but then blames climate catastrophe on the choices of those people he has effectively manipulated. This is somewhat like Milgram who invented a manipulative experiment that he could only envision personally benefiting from, going on to accuse those who completed it of being "moral imbeciles…"[28] Again, we are all personally responsible for our harmful actions, but the leadership with the greatest ability to control the wider infrastructure has an even greater responsibility to promote progressive and ethical change. As this book's journey into both the Obedience studies and the Holocaust illustrates, the fish rots from the head down.

In conclusion, when I watch Milgram's 45-minute documentary film with my students, I do not see "obedience to authority," and I'd go so far as to call anyone who does a fool. Looking beyond his laboratory walls, I instead see climate catastrophe, nuclear war, and untold other examples of organizational malevolence so common in modern society. It is interesting to note that although Milgram was never confident about what he'd captured in his laboratory, he was certain that whatever it was, it did not bode well for the longevity of humankind. With a variety of disasters looming, it is not difficult to sense Milgram's concern over the strong propensity for powerful people and their functionary helpers to prioritize relatively trivial personal interests over the need to act in response to more urgent moral demands. His words of warning may prove to be prophetic:

> The behavior revealed in the experiments reported here is normal human behavior but revealed under conditions that show with particular clarity the danger to human survival inherent in our makeup… This is a fatal flaw nature has designed into us, and which in the long run gives our species only a modest chance of survival.[29]

Notes

1. Russell (2017).
2. Similar to the theory of responsibility ambiguity, Kühl (2016, p. 141) presents his "*gray zone theory...*" He argues that "when it comes to the use of violence by police officers and soldiers, there is a 'gray zone' in which it is not clear whether an order is legal or not. [...] When moving within this gray zone, the organization – and, ultimately, the organization's members – must carefully weigh up which acts of violence are *covered* by the state's laws and which are not" (p. 141). [italics added] I support much of this theory except, unlike the theory of responsibility ambiguity, it fails to recognize that the dilemma these Germans encountered need not revolve around the law—dilemmas can (much like during the Obedience studies) center around a non-legal moral issue. The focus of Kühl's theory on the content of the law thereby fails to place the issue of personal responsibility front and center when functionaries are weighing up how to act when within this gray zone. Interestingly, when presenting his theory Kühl alludes to the central importance of responsibility: "in democracies and dictatorships alike, police officers know from experience which of their actions they could legally justify if required and which they could not. Knowing that acts of violence in a legal gray zone can quickly be attributed to the person instead of their role, *they make sure that nothing will happen to them even if something happens*" (p. 141). [italics added] Put more directly, before engaging in acts of violence, police, and soldiers (much like Milgram's 'obedient' participants) first ensured they were, as Kühl says, sufficiently "covered..." If Germany won the war, the executioners were, of course, "covered" because as Hitler reminded them, nobody would dare question their methods—might makes right. And if Germany lost the war, the police officers, for example, could evade or diminish their personal responsibility by blaming their superiors. The key goal for any link who decides to contribute to a malevolent organizational goal is to try and *avoid personal responsibility*, and they are to do so *by any means possible.*
3. Lutsky (1995, p. 63).
4. Browning (1992, pp. 74–75). See also Beorn (2014, pp. 72, 82).
5. SMP, Box 153, Audiotape #2305.
6. Consider, for example, Martin Mundschütz, a member of Einsatzgruppe D, who requested in a letter to his superior officer that he be transferred out of the extermination campaign and back to Austria: "My nerves have failed. That they have failed is only a result of my nervous breakdown three weeks ago which makes me suffer day and night from obsessions that drive me almost mad. Although it seems as if I now manage to

handle these obsessions, I apparently still have lost completely the control over my nerves and am no longer able to manage my willpower. I can't suppress my tears." So Mundschütz had lost control of his willpower (that was obviously in favor of participating in the executions) and was apologizing to his superior for failing to have "performed as a man." Because of his nervous breakdown, Mundschütz was simply reassigned to other ancillary (non-shooting) duties. However, Mundschütz remained unsatisfied by this reassignment and requested a transfer out of Einsatzgruppe D completely. As he explained: "Now I am supposed to drive around shopping. I am asking you to save me from this charge, because I don't want to bother my comrades nor other people with the unhappy performance of a crying soldier. … If you, sir, have a heart and understanding for one of your subordinates, who wishes nothing more than to sacrifice himself for Germany but does not want to stage the drama of a supposed wimp, please do remove me from here" (quoted in Kühne 2010, p. 86). As Kühne notes, those Germans who pulled out of the shootings like Mundschütz "did not question the morality of the community, but instead interpreted their own psychological constitution as abnormal" (2010, p. 87)—he was a weakling.

7. Actually, in terms of the squeamishness versus ethics obstacles, both Nazi innovators and Milgram arrived at a very similar solution: At the last link in their respective organizational chains, both inserted a wall to separate cause from effect.

8. Holocaust historian Yaacov Lozowick (2002, p. 274) found the Nazi perpetrators' "rational explanations" for their behavior (clearly trivial motives like peer pressure and career advancement among others) "shallow and unpersuasive…" Surely, there had to be more to their destructive behavior than this! But as Milgram's psychological trap illustrated, for many participants, motivational forces as pathetic as a fear of having to engage in a confrontation with the experimenter can be genuine when a powerless victim's miseries have, for the most part, been diverted by certain non-human technologies (like a wall) so that they cannot affect a harm doer's emotional universe.

9. Quoted in Perry (2012, p. 367).

10. Milgram (1974, p. 11).

11. Harvey (2005).

12. Bartov (1996, p. 9).

13. Chomsky and Polk (2013).

14. Hilberg (1961, p. 760).

15. Hilberg (1961, p. 760).

16. Worthy (2013).

17. Simmons (1976, p. 5).

18. See https://www.ted.com/talks/jared_diamond_on_why_societies_collapse. Accessed 21 September 2017.
19. See ftp://aftp.cmdl.noaa.gov/products/trends/co2/co2_mm_mlo.txt. Accessed 22 September 2017.
20. See Guiot and Cramer (2016, pp. 467–468).
21. Aly (2006, p. 4).
22. Carroll (2017, p. 229).
23. Banerjee et al. (2015).
24. MacKay and Munro (2012, p. 1530).
25. MacKay and Munro (2012, p. 1529).
26. Brown (2017).
27. Brown (2017).
28. Quoted in Blass (2004, p. 100).
29. Milgram (1974, p. 188).

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