*Plenary Lecture*

**Revisiting the Banality of Evil:**

**Contemporary Political Violence**

**and the Milgram Experiments**

*Paul Hollander*

**Abstract**

Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments have been among the most influential and controversial studies in social psychology in recent times. They were also highly original, theoretically significant and relevant to some of the major political and social-historical experiences and preoccupations of the 20th century. His findings were often linked to the influential (and similarly controversial) ideas of Hannah Arendt, notably to her concept of the "banality of evil." Milgram’s experiments seemed to provide empirical support for her highly speculative propositions inspired by the case of Adolf Eichmann and especially his trial. These experiments were sometimes called "the Eichmann experiment." Milgram himself wrote that "after witnessing hundreds of ordinary people submit to the authority in our experiments, I must conclude that Arendt’s conception of the *banality of evil* comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine."  (*Obedience to Authority*, New York, 1974, p. 6).

Milgram’s findings were both unexpected and startling: the experiments showed that ordinary human beings were capable and willing to inflict a great deal of pain on other human beings for no other reason than being ordered to do so by an authority figure. The implication of these findings seemed obvious and far reaching: virtually anybody could become a mass murderer, or his accomplice, without any ideological or political motive or belief, and without being a sadist. Belonging to a bureaucratic organization and readiness to obey one’s superiors appeared to be sufficient conditions for performing inhumane actions, including participation in mass murder.

My presentation will focus on the affinity between the obedience experiments and the broader conclusions drawn from them, with special reference to the concept of the "banality of evil." I will also discuss why Milgram’s findings resonated with the educated public, why they were also subject to criticism, and why they have remained of great public and social scientific interest.

The major thrust of the paper will be the attempt to assess the contribution these experiments have made to a better understanding of political violence, and especially mass murder, and the light they shed on such violence when carried out by different types of political systems and movements.

Special attention will be given to communist systems, and the role of the ideals these systems sought to realize through the use of political violence.

The presentation will also include the problematic aspects of these experiments, and the questionable conclusions drawn from them.

In the first place, the experiments do not help to differentiate between

a) various types of political violence, and

b) between individuals who devise, design and legitimate them on the one hand, and those who execute them, on the other.

Secondly, the experiments lend themselves to a morally relativistic interpretation of political violence by endorsing the idea of the "banality of evil." Arguably, the latter discourages moral judgment and attempts to assign responsibility for devising, committing or legitimating moral outrages and atrocities inspired by political agendas and objectives.

Third, the experiments de-emphasize

a) the importance of ideology, of strongly held beliefs and the often associated political passions which played a crucial part in the major campaigns of political violence of the 20th century;

b) by implication they also divert attention from social and personal pathologies which play a part in political violence, and

c) they do not address the possibility that several different motives are likely to *combine, or converge* in the genesis of political violence.

That is to say, obedience to authority is compatible with enthusiastic support for the objectives of the power-holders, of the authorities; it may also be with compatible with the pleasure derived from the infliction of pain.

Fourth, the experiments and their prevalent interpretations have focused on the Holocaust and overlooked political violence of other types, especially those associated with communist systems and movements. While there are many references in Milgram’s study to Nazi political violence, and a few to atrocities committed by the U.S. military forces in Vietnam, not a single reference is made to the vast amount of political violence perpetrated by various communist systems. Also noteworthy, that, far as I know, no attempts have been made to apply Milgram’s ideas to the analysis of political violence committed by communist systems. Only theories of totalitarianism addressed this issue but without the psychological approaches and considerations pioneered by Milgram.

In light of the points made above there is much room for a reconsideration of the obedience experiments and their relevance to different types of political violence.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \*