

The Authoritarian Dynamic – By Karen Stenner

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The Authoritarian Dynamic. By Karen Stenner . (Cambridge University Press, 2005.)

The subject of Stenner's important book is authoritarianism, about which much—too much, one could say—has already been written. The torrent of words began, of course, with Theodore Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford. When *The Authoritarian Personality*—all 990 pages of it—was published in 1950, it was greeted with widespread acclaim, and then, in the space of a few years, buried under an avalanche of criticism. The critics rightly pointed out the study's defects, and they were persuasive. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the critics established only that Adorno and his colleagues had failed to prove their claims, not that the claims themselves were erroneous. Over the years, research and writing on authoritarianism soldiered on, wrestling with the questions raised but not resolved in the original work. Now, more than half a century later, is there really anything new to say? You bet.

Authoritarianism, Stenner says, arises out of a basic and recurrent human dilemma: how to strike a proper balance between group authority and uniformity, on the one hand, and individual autonomy and diversity, on the other. Authoritarians choose the former over the latter: They are inclined to glorify, encourage, and reward uniformity, while disparaging, suppressing, and punishing difference. Stenner claims that authoritarianism is a universal predisposition; deep-seated, perhaps innate, difficult to alter.

Does authoritarianism, defined this way, affect how citizens think about race, protection of speech and assembly, sexuality, crime and punishment? Not necessarily. Stenner's primary contribution (first set out in a 1997 piece with Stanley Feldman in *Political Psychology*) is to specify the conditions under which authoritarianism is activated. She argues that authoritarianism becomes relevant only when social cohesion is threatened: when the culture appears to be fragmenting, or when leaders prove themselves unworthy of public trust. Then a whole repertoire of defenses—glorification of the in-group; denigration of the out-group; obedience to higher authority; conformity to traditional norms; intolerance towards those who fail to abide by society's rules—swings into action. This, Stenner argues, is the authoritarian dynamic.

To test her claims, Stenner needs a new measure of authoritarianism, one that faithfully reflects her definition of authoritarianism while simultaneously avoiding the serious defects plaguing most standard measures. Stenner's method is disarmingly straightforward. She simply asks people to choose values that children should be encouraged to learn at home. Those who select "good manners" and "obedience" as primary virtues for children are authoritarian; those who choose "imagination" and "independence" are libertarian.

Next, Stenner demonstrates that authoritarianism, measured this way, is not the same as conservatism. She argues that two are conceptually distinct, in that the authoritarian is preoccupied with difference, while the conservative is preoccupied with change. They are empirically distinct as well: Stenner shows that authoritarianism and several varieties of conservatism are nearly independent, and that between the two, authoritarianism is by far the more powerful predictor of intolerance. This holds in the United States and in Britain, Spain,

Russia, the Czech Republic, and many other European nations, east and west. Stenner concludes that "authoritarianism is the primary determinant of general intolerance of difference worldwide" (133).

Stenner then switches gears to report the results of in-depth interviews with small numbers of extreme authoritarians and extreme libertarians. These materials are fascinating and often unsettling. Authoritarians are more likely than libertarians to display racial animosity, to fall into the language of "us" and "them", to indulge in a kind of vulgar patriotism, and to express dismay over society's moral decline.

Finally, and most important in Stenner's view, are the results from a pair of experiments, one embedded within a national telephone survey, the other conducted with college undergraduates. In both, threat to social cohesion was the key independent variable, manipulated in both cases in a way that seems innocuous. People were merely introduced to fictitious news stories (or summaries of same) that implied threat or reassurance: that the public was divided or unified, or that presidents generally live up to public trust or do not. Stenner finds that such threats induce greater intolerance among authoritarians *and* greater tolerance among libertarians. In the presence of threat, authoritarians were more likely to say that that government should prevent political extremists from making a speech in their community, that children should be required to begin their school day with a prayer, and so on, while libertarians were less likely to say so. Authoritarians react to challenges to the social order by emphasizing uniformity and suppressing difference; libertarians react by celebrating and defending individual autonomy and diversity, and by re-doubling their commitment to individual freedom and tolerance of difference.

Taken all around, the evidence generally supports Stenner's claims. Various manifestations of intolerance do seem to be, in Stenner's words, "kindred spirits . . . driven by the same engine, fueled by the same impulses, and manifested under the same conditions" (269).

Stenner's book is very good, but it is not perfect. Here are a few things that worried me. First, Stenner finds that threat enhances the reliability of her measure of authoritarianism. She is right to argue that this is not only a technical matter—that authoritarianism becomes coherent in the presence of threat and becomes "unhinged" in the presence of reassurance is interesting—but it is a technical matter in part. To what extent can the apparent increase in the potency of authoritarianism to structure intolerance under threat be accounted for by authoritarianism's augmented reliability alone? Second, Stenner's experiments are complicated, her analysis more so, and the results do not always fully cooperate. More than once I was left wondering whether a finding would stand up across alternative and for the most part simpler specifications. Last, Stenner's analysis is confined to whites. This is strange, since her aspirations are so general. She claims to be making an argument about a universal predisposition, one that works the same way across time and culture. Towards the end of the book, Stenner offers some provocative speculations about the politics of fear and the dangers of too much democracy. Most books end in exhaustion, but Stenner still has interesting things to say on important and general matters—but she says them without recognizing that her analysis has simply ignored how authoritarianism might work for millions of people in our own increasingly diverse society.

None of this kvetching is meant to diminish interest in what Stenner has to say. Stenner has written an excellent and important book. She has done so while moving against a strong tide—two strong tides, really. Stenner's book can be read as an argument for a grander, less

timid social science. She exhorts us to attempt to explain empirical regularities that cross time and culture with elegant theory and universal processes. Stenner is respectful of research that takes historical and cultural contingencies into account, but she is pushing an alternative, and her book is a beautiful illustration of what she has in mind for social science in general. Stenner is also running against the tide of cognitive imperialism. In studies of public opinion these days, the emphasis is primarily upon the cognitive; the basic task of citizenship is the adequate management of information. In contrast, Stenner's book is an argument for emotion and personality—topics not easily accommodated by conventional models and which seem, perhaps for other reasons, to make many political scientists uncomfortable. For those who believe that authoritarianism is an idea whose time has passed, read Stenner's book and think again.