

World as Laboratory: Experiments With Mice, Mazes and Men

Book Review

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Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

In perhaps the most famous psychological experiment of modern times, Stanley Milgram proved that most of us are no better than Nazis. In 1961 the Yale psychologist divided pairs of paid volunteers into test-takers and shock therapists; each wrong answer from the former earned an electric shock by the latter, who could hear but could not see his partner in an adjoining room.

The test-takers were never actually shocked, but were directed to scream and plead as the shock therapists — ordered to proceed by an authoritative psychologist — thought they were administering near-lethal zaps. Two-thirds of participants dumbly obeyed the white coat even though they thought they were practically killing an innocent stranger.

The American Psychological Association, appalled at the experiment's effects on participants, stripped Milgram of his membership, but he nonetheless earned a place in history: He later analyzed the My Lai massacre and his name has surfaced repeatedly in discussions of torture at Abu Ghraib.

The Milgram experiments were the pinnacle of decades of research into social control and human engineering driven by the “behaviorist” school of psychology. Born at the University of Chicago in the first years of the 20th century, behaviorism posited that human actions are unaffected by free will or consciousness, and instead may be empirically predicted, recorded and shaped by external stimuli. Just as a plant turns toward the sun, a frustrated human lashes out aggressively; the plant can be conditioned by its orientation to light, as can the human by modifying his level of frustration. Or by giving stern orders, as Milgram dismayingly proved.

Rebecca Lemov, a lecturer at the University of Washington, has produced a lively and well-researched history of the human engineering field and its broad intellectual and social legacy. Lemov nicely structures the book around key social scientists in the behaviorist movement, most of them psychologists at Yale's Institute of Human Relations from the 1920s to the 1960s. From John B. Watson's early (and breathtakingly durable) thesis that animal behavior is an infallible predictor of human behavior came decades of laboratory studies of white rats marching around strung out on drugs and shocked into doing this or that. Then came George Murdoch's effort to amass all knowledge about humankind in great storerooms of boxes and card catalogs, which, when brought to the attention of the Defense Department, earned the fusty professor a shiny commission in the Navy in addition to grants from Uncle Sam. (“[W]e were repeatedly subject to Jap attack and ambush . . . I really had the time of my life.”)

With the birth of the Cold War, a more nefarious collaboration began between government and social scientists, as the CIA funded universities' mind control and brainwashing experiments that left unsuspecting volunteers psychologically impaired. One example was the "psychic driving" of McGill University's Ewan Cameron, who played subjects an endless loop of one of their own statements from therapy, such as "You killed your mother," while keeping them packed with mind-altering drugs and locked in sensory deprivation chambers. They emerged broken, ready to "be built up again." This is real "Manchurian Candidate" stuff, and it is easy to see how it could have a dramatic impact on human behavior.

An anthropologist, Lemov is less interested in the technical features of this research than in the culture of those who would practice laboratory totalitarianism in the name of political anti-totalitarianism. Lifelong sufferer of manic-depressive disorder O. Hobart Mowrer late in life found Jesus, dropped behaviorism and pioneered the snuggly group therapy of Alcoholics Anonymous. In contrast, John Dollard, an anthropologist of Southern racial tensions, eventually rejected the subtleties of the human experience and joined the rigid behaviorists at Yale. More chillingly, we learn that McGill's Cameron, a dark wizard if ever there was one, actually helped prosecute Nazi doctors at the Nuremberg tribunals.

Lemov's central thesis might have been spun out a little further. She argues that the world at large eventually replaced the laboratory as all these experiments spawned real human engineering in the form of modern annoyances like advertising and focus groups. But rather than trace the connection in detail, she leaves off in the 1960s, before the research really began to bear commercial fruit. And not for want of material: John Watson, whom she profiles, left academia in 1920 to join the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency. Scientists must of course be free to research broadly, but if the decades of human and animal suffering that Lemov recounts have served primarily to allow modern money grubbers to play mind control games with consumers, much has been wasted.

The author is also too eager to see in mid-century social science a vast plot to control human behavior. Plenty of mid-century anthropologists and psychologists simply wished to explore and understand their world and had no designs to bend others to their will. As the book demonstrates, a few well-positioned scientists with that aim were enough to do plenty of harm.

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