

# Fuck Authority

## & How to do it Successfully

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2019

a review of

*Resisting Illegitimate Authority: A Thinking Person's Guide to Being an Anti-Authoritarian—Strategies, Tools, and Models* by Bruce E. Levine. AK Press, 2018

What makes someone anti-authoritarian? Bruce Levine, in his sometimes engaging book, *Resisting Illegitimate Authority*, starts by talking about his own childhood experiences testing adult authority, in this case, his teacher, and how he decided whether her authority was legitimate:

“Mrs. Rike did not hold a grudge, and so she maintained her authority for me. Had she taken revenge...she would have lost my respect and lost her authority for me.”

Levine, a psychologist, speculates that if he'd grown up in the current school climate, where kids are often labeled as ADD or ADHD, he might well have been medicated for his “acting out.”

The book is structured as a guide to the dos and don'ts of being anti-authoritarian (you'll have to decide whether to accept Levine's authority), mostly by giving examples from history. These stories are written simply and accessibly, and seem aimed at people who are new to radical politics.

Levine discusses anti-authoritarians who sabotaged their effort by being self-destructive (Phil Ochs, Lenny Bruce, Ida Lupino) or violent (Alexander Berkman, Leon Czolgosz, Ted Kaczynski). He approaches this with sympathy, recognizing the damage that our society does to people, and the ways that activists are under a lot of pressure. He suggests that the resulting rage can cause people to turn to violence even when it doesn't serve a good tactical or strategic purpose.

In contrast, he holds up as examples those who furthered their cause by their approach to resisting authority. These include Henry David Thoreau, Scott Nearing, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Helen Keller, Jane Jacobs, Noam Chomsky, and George Carlin.

Levine also gives examples of how anti-authoritarians are marginalized (Thomas Paine, Ralph Nader, Malcolm X) and criminalized (Emma Goldman, Eugene Debs, Edward Snowden). His capsule accounts, written from a psychological perspective, make for interesting reading, though the lessons are quite general—for example, find community support, know when to back off, find ways to ward off depression.

*Resisting Illegitimate Authority* devotes chapters to examining anti-authoritarian parenting and relationships. They offer insights that could help people in political movements understand how to find support and how to share it with others.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of gaps in the discussion, and some questionable assumptions, starting with the lack of substantive attention to what is legitimate vs. illegitimate authority and how to know the difference. Perhaps it is simply a question of conscience, but since this goes to the heart of deciding when to dissent or resist authority, it's an important issue, especially when deciding whether and how to support people with whom one may differ.

Levine's chapter on philosophies that are anti-authoritarian is also fairly superficial; it has very little to say about how those philosophies manifest in practice. Buddhism, one of his examples, obviously has had some very authoritarian variations, including the Tibetan theocracy prior to the Chinese invasion in 1945 and the current genocide against the Myanmar Rohingya.

The chapter on Native American societies as anti-authoritarian could be an opportunity to explore what cultural elements foster anti-authoritarianism, but his blanket characterization of all the tribes north of Mexico as being essentially similar in this regard is ethnocentric and inaccurate.

A deeper problem is that Levine generally writes as if personality is static and consistent. He talks about authoritarians and anti-authoritarians as if they were distinct and unchanging groups, and late in the book introduces the derogatory term "normies" to describe people who aren't authoritarian, but go along with the rules of society without much question or resistance.

In similar mode, he talks about anti-authoritarians as if they constitute an oppressed group that has been that way from childhood, rather than including people who become aware later in their lives. Even some of his own exemplary anti-authoritarians—like the socialist labor leader Eugene Debs—clearly moved from accepting the rules of society to challenging them.

Another example, Malcolm X, moved from being high up in the Nation of Islam, a hierarchical organization, to challenging its leader's authority. Most people have a mixture of authoritarian and anti-authoritarian in their makeup, and what emerges depends on their life experiences and on the influence of people around them.

Some of Levine's bias may be from his own experiences supporting people who have been labeled as mentally ill simply because they challenged authority at a young age. It may seem to him that such people are innately anti-authoritarian and could wear it as a badge of distinction. It's right to give them support, but we also need to encourage resisting authority as a way of pointing to the kind of society we want, in which authority is collective and flows from the people around it.

*Resisting Illegitimate Authority* is a worthwhile attempt at examining the challenges of being an anti-authoritarian from a psychological viewpoint, and could serve as a framework for finding a way to make it an emotionally sustainable lifestyle.

But if the goal is really to create a free society, we also need to find a psychology of how to move people from authoritarianism or acceptance to challenging authority, as well as how to support those who have already reached that point.

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