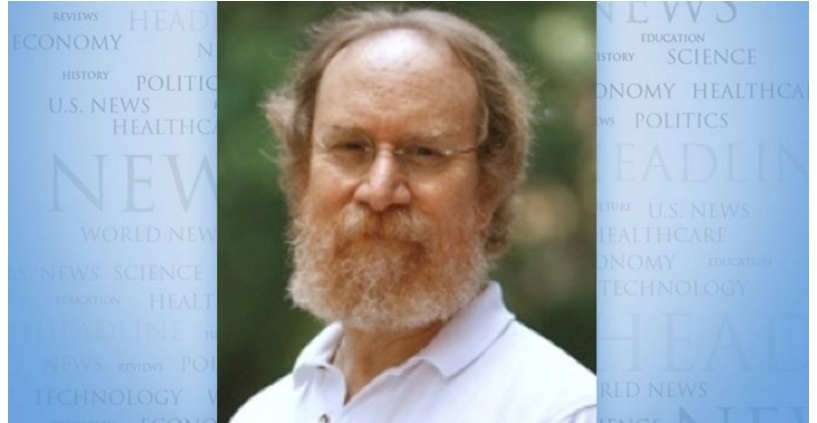




Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on July 4, 2012

Are Americans Not Submissive Enough?

If I didn't know better, I'd have thought *New York Times* columnist David Brooks was having a laugh at our expense. Alas, Brooks means every word of his column titled "[The Follower Problem](#)," as anyone who reads him regularly will realize.



"I don't know if America has a leadership problem; it certainly has a followership problem," Brooks laments. "Vast majorities of Americans don't trust their institutions."

Worse than that, he thinks Americans dislike all authority.

We live in a culture that finds it easier to assign moral status to victims of power than to those who wield power.... Then there is our fervent devotion to equality, to the notion that all people are equal and deserve equal recognition and respect.... But the main problem is our inability to think properly about how power should be used to bind and build.... Those "Question Authority" bumper stickers no longer symbolize an attempt to distinguish just and unjust authority. They symbolize an attitude of opposing authority.

I think Brooks is wrong, though I wish he were right. I see little real rejection of political authority. Too bad. We need it.

But let's assume Brooks is right. Is anti-authoritarianism a problem? You'd have to be a nationalist devotee of intrusive government to think so. Who else would value mindless obeisance to political authority?

Brooks disparages "our fervent devotion to equality" because it's "hard in this frame of mind to define and celebrate greatness, to hold up others who are immeasurably superior to ourselves."

Is he kidding? Is he really finding fault with those of us who fail to recognize greatness and superiority in "our political leaders"? ("Misleaders" is a better word.) Where, pray tell, is the evidence of either greatness or superiority in those whom Brooks has in mind? For some reason he doesn't provide any. He just takes it for granted.

He quotes Dwight Eisenhower, who wrote, "Always try to associate yourself with and learn as much as you can from those who know more than you do, who do better than you, who see more clearly than you."

That's good advice, but is Brooks suggesting that our misleaders know more, do better, and see more clearly than the rest of us? Can he give us any reason for that assertion?



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Presidents routinely interfere with our lives and authorize the mass murder we call “war.” Members of Congress do equally stupid things, such as passing bills authorizing unaccountable and ignorant bureaucrats to write inane rules about how to manage everything from medical care to the financial industry.

These people get elected not by demonstrating superiority, or even greater-than-average knowledge, but by their facility for setting the right mood for voters. Politics is theater, and politicians are actors. If one portrays a character that enough people find appealing, he or she gets elected.

Of course, that’s not all politicians do. They devote a good deal of time promising new ways to spend other people’s money — money that will be extracted from the taxpayers by threat of violence. They will also borrow money, which means they will create liabilities for future generations that have no say in the matter.

This is greatness? It’s ludicrous to read superiority into anything they do. Nefariousness and condescension are more like it.

Brooks fears the consequences of a general skepticism about authority:

You end up with movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Parties that try to dispense with authority altogether. They reject hierarchies and leaders because they don’t believe in the concepts. The whole world should be like the Internet — a disbursed semianarchy in which authority is suspect and each individual is king.

Again, I wish he were right. But he is far too optimistic. (He’d call it pessimistic.) Neither Occupy Wall Street nor the Tea Party has identified the root of our political and economic problems, and consequently their solutions are not anti-authoritarian enough. But at least they sense something is wrong systemically. That’s a start.

Brooks, on the other hand, thinks it’s not the leaders who need changing so much as those who distrust “their” leaders.

“We have to relearn the art of following,” he writes.

No we don’t. We need to learn the art of living free.

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