The behavior of participants within Milgram’s Obedience to Authority studies and Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment is widely understood to demonstrate people’s inherent propensity to cede responsibility to those in authority and conform blindly to their wishes. This parallels a belief that brutality in general arises from passive conformity and compliance. However, historical and social psychological research suggests that agents of tyranny actively identify with their leaders and are motivated to work energetically and creatively toward goals that they believe those leaders wish to see fulfilled. Such analysis provides the basis for a radical reinterpretation of the behaviour of Milgram’s and Zimbardo’s participants. This reinterpretation is supported by recent studies that revisit these paradigms and it encourages us to see the classic studies not as demonstrations of obedience or conformity, but as explorations of the power of identity leadership to induce dynamic and committed followership.

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