

The following is an excerpt of my recently published book, [Resisting Illegitimate Authority: A Thinking Person's Guide to Being an Anti-Authoritarian—Strategies, Tools, and Models](#). The second section of the book is called "The Assault on U.S. Anti-Authoritarians" and includes chapters on the "Criminalization of Anti-Authoritarians"; "Genocide of an Anti-Authoritarian People: Native Americans"; "Schooling's Assault on Young Anti-Authoritarians"; and "Psychiatric Assault and Marginalization: Not Just Frances Farmer," a part of which is excerpted below.

The use of psychiatric diagnoses to discredit, dismiss, and marginalize famous and non-famous anti-authoritarians is common.

Earlier I discussed how several mainstream media journalists, attempting to discredit whistleblower Edward Snowden, psychopathologized him with labels such as "grandiose narcissist." Attorney and journalist Glenn Greenwald also documents the mainstream media's psychopathologizing of other recent whistleblowers, including WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning. The mainstream media has depicted Assange as bizarre and paranoid, the *New York Times* labeling him with "erratic and imperious behavior" and "delusional grandeur." The mainstream media also promoted a view that Manning was motivated not by her moral convictions but gender struggles, anti-gay bullying, and conflict with her father resulting in personality disorders.

Ralph Nader, as noted, for challenging the corporatism of both the Democratic and Republican parties and running for president, was described by a columnist for the *Nation* as "a very deluded man . . . a psychologically troubled man." Malcolm X, for his distrust of authorities, was diagnosed by FBI profilers with "pre-psychotic paranoid schizophrenia."

The practice of psychopathologizing anti-authoritarians so as to discredit and marginalize them is certainly not exclusive to the United States. In the Soviet Union, political dissidents were routinely psychiatrically hospitalized and drugged; and today, Chinese dissidents continue to be diagnosed with mental illness and forcibly treated.

In the United States, the practice of psychopathologizing anti-authoritarians began at the very beginning of the nation. Benjamin Rush, as noted, was a friend of Thomas Paine in pre-Revolutionary War Philadelphia, but then shunned Paine after *The Age of Reason*. Today, Benjamin Rush is well-known among psychiatrists as “the father of American psychiatry,” as his image adorns the seal of the American Psychiatric Association. In addition to Rush’s abandonment of Thomas Paine, he also attempted to gain favor with the new ruling class in the United States another way. In 1805, Rush diagnosed those rebelling against the newly centralized federal authority as having an “excess of the passion for liberty” that “constituted a form of insanity,” which he labeled as the disease of *anarchia*.

In 1851, Louisiana physician Dr. Samuel Cartwright reported his discovery of *drapetomania*, the disease that caused slaves to flee captivity. Cartwright believed that absent of this illness slaves were “like children . . . constrained by unalterable physiological laws to love those in authority over them.” Cartwright also reported his discovery of *dysesthesia*, a disease that caused slaves to pay insufficient attention to their jobs, “breaking the tools he works with, and spoiling everything he touches,” as well as being resistant to punishment and not feeling the “pain of any consequences.”

In 1958, when civil rights activist Clennon W. King Jr. attempted to enroll at the all-white University of Mississippi, the Mississippi police arrested him on the grounds that “any nigger who tried to enter Ole Miss *must* be crazy.” Following his arrest, historian David Oshinsky reports, he was then taken to the county courthouse where a “lunacy warrant” was issued on him, and he was confined to a mental hospital for twelve days, and only declared “competent” when he promised to leave Mississippi. In *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (2010), psychiatrist and sociologist Jonathan Metzl details systemic racism that labels “threats to authority as mental illness,” and how this process increases the likelihood that black men will get diagnosed with schizophrenia.

A belief that one is being surveilled has sometimes been enough “evidence” for anti-authoritarians to be assessed as delusionally paranoid. Recall how when Ralph Nader was being followed by General Motors detectives, he sensed it and told others, and

sounded like he was delusional. Nader, however, was lucky that detectives were incompetent and got caught. However, Ernest Hemingway was not so lucky.

By 1960, Hemingway was labeled delusionally paranoid about FBI surveillance. His friend and biographer A. E. Hotchner recounted Hemingway saying: "The feds . . . It's the worst hell. The goddamnedest hell. They've bugged everything. . . . Everything's bugged. Can't use the phone. Mail intercepted."

Long after Hemingway's death, the FBI released his file in response to a Freedom of Information petition, and Hotchner reported: "It revealed that beginning in the 1940s J. Edgar Hoover had placed Ernest under surveillance because he was suspicious of Ernest's activities in Cuba. Over the following years, agents filed reports on him and tapped his phones. The surveillance continued all through his confinement at St. Mary's Hospital. It is likely that the phone outside his room was tapped after all. In the years since, I have tried to reconcile Ernest's fear of the FBI, which I regretfully misjudged, with the reality of the FBI file. I now believe he truly sensed the surveillance, and that it substantially contributed to his anguish and his suicide."

Hemingway was treated with electroshock (ECT) as many as 15 times in December 1960, then in January 1961, he was "released in ruins," according to another Hemingway biographer, Jeffrey Meyers. Hotchner reported that Hemingway's loss of memory caused by the ECT made him even more depressed and hopeless, as Hemingway had stated, "Well, what is the sense of ruining my head and erasing my memory, which is my capital, and putting me out of business?" In July 1961, shortly before his 62nd birthday and soon after Hemingway had been given still another series of shock treatments, he committed suicide.

Anti-authoritarians' intense reactions to insults and injustices can provide justification for authorities to psychopathologize them. A young Emma Goldman was lucky to live in an era in which she was not pathologized after she threw a pitcher of water at the face of a woman who was happy with the 1887 execution of the Haymarket martyrs, but other anti-authoritarians have not been so lucky and their strong reactions to insults and injustices have often been psychopathologized. This is especially true for intense reactions by women, one of the more well-known examples being actress

Frances Farmer (1913–1970), brought to public attention in the 1982 movie *Frances*, starring Jessica Lange.

Farmer revealed her anti-authoritarian streak as a senior in high school when she won a writing contest with a controversial essay, "God Dies," and then again as a young woman when, in 1935, she accepted a newspaper prize for a trip to the Soviet Union over her mother's strong objections. Farmer was stunningly beautiful but rebelled against studio casting based solely on her looks. She also resisted the studio's attempt to control her private life, and she refused to attend Hollywood parties. Farmer aspired to be a serious actress, and she took time off from movie work to appear in a Clifford Odets stage production of one of his plays.

Farmer, feeling oppressed by Hollywood authorities and betrayed by men she had trusted, began abusing alcohol. In 1942, she was stopped by the police for driving with her headlights on bright in the wartime blackout zone. She was jailed and fined; and after she hadn't paid her entire fine, the police tracked her down and entered her hotel room without permission. Then, as journalist Matt Evans recounts, "Frances, who'd been sleeping in the nude, face down on the bed, under the influence of alcohol and somnifacient—at noon!—reacted as anyone would have." She became belligerent with the police when they arrested her. And then, after she was sentenced to 180 days in Los Angeles County jail, she became physically aggressive in the courtroom and was forced into a straitjacket.

"If Frances had been left alone to serve her 180 days in jail," Evans concluded, "it's quite likely that, eventually, she would have sorted herself out." Instead, family members and others from the movie industry successfully lobbied the judge to send her to the Kimball Sanitarium, her first institutionalization. Then in 1944, Frances's mother committed Frances to Western State Mental Hospital, where she was recommitted two additional times.

"Frances was institutionalized," Evans concludes, "not because she was insane but because she'd been legally vulnerable. Because her dad, Ernest, was a lawyer. Because her mother, Lillian, despite whatever unconscious animus may have lain in her heart, may have thought in her desperation and exasperation that

institutionalization was the last viable recourse to help her daughter heal. Heal? And become submissive and obedient.”

In recent decades, children and adolescents in the United States who are not submissive and are disobedient have been increasingly psychopathologized. Several of the famous anti-authoritarians profiled in this book, if children today, would likely have been labeled with at least one psychiatric disorder.

Malcolm X’s childhood, as noted, was replete with trauma including his family breakup and then foster homes, resulting in his rebelling and engaging in theft. Today, a teenage Malcolm X would likely be labeled with the “disruptive disorder” diagnosis called “conduct disorder” (CD) for criminally disruptive behaviors. And owing especially to the fact of being in foster care, he would very likely be prescribed psychiatric drugs, including antipsychotic drugs.

Several other anti-authoritarians profiled in this book, including Eugene Debs, Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Jane Jacobs quit school or didn’t take it seriously. Today, for such obviously intelligent kids, this contempt for school would make them highly vulnerable to a psychiatric diagnosis.

Bruce E. Levine, a practicing clinical psychologist often at odds with the mainstream of his profession, writes and speaks about how society, culture, politics and psychology intersect. His most recent book is [Resisting Illegitimate Authority: A Thinking Person's Guide to Being an Anti-Authoritarian—Strategies, Tools, and Models](#) (AK Press, 2018). His Web site is brucelevine.net