Courage and Conformity in Comparative Perspective –

Nazi Germany and Beyond

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It is painful to read accounts of holocaust survivors, hear witnesses of the recent Rwanda genocide, or watch news about Serb concentration camps and mass rapes. How can human beings commit such atrocities? Our immediate response to that question is that such aberrant and vile actions can only be carried out by sick and sadistic minds. Given this natural reaction, the first approach to study the evils of the twentieth century is to focus on the personal traits of the perpetrators. It thus seems natural enough to turn to the field of social psychology. After all, social psychology seeks to "understand and explain how thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others" (Gordon Allport, quoted after Worchel/Cooper/Goethals 1991: 7).

In this paper, however, I will argue for the relevance of a sociological approach. I contend that that genocide is more than the sum of individual atrocities. Its acts are non-spontaneous and well prepared. "Successful" genocide involves meticulous organization and long-term planning. Its perhaps most disturbing feature is, that it is an end in itself. If there is choice to be made between military reasoning and carrying on with the genocide, the perpetrators almost always go for the latter.

If genocide is a collective evil then, the question is what sociology has to offer analyzing he occurrence and recurrence of genocide. As sociology is situated at the intersection between individual actions and structural outcomes it should be well prepared to add to our understanding of genocide in order, of course, to help preventing it.

I will first look at the micro level of genocide, i.e. at perpetrators, conformists, and rescuers, that is those who commit atrocities, those who do and those who do not try to stop murder. I will discuss dispositional and situational approaches, the most important approaches offered by social psychology to study courage and conformity. I will briefly review the contributions of both avenues of research in the first two sections. Then, I will try to point out how sociology can fill some of the gaps left open by social psychological studies. In particular, I will put forward four ways of combining the micro and the macro level of genocide. In the concluding section I will offer some tentative suggestions for preventing genocide.

1. Conformity: Perpetrators and Compliers

Why do some people take on immense personal risks to help fellow citizens who are in terrible need? Why do some have the courage to stand against an oppressive regime against all odds? Why do so many go along with orders from the state and society whatever these orders may be? When do we help and why don't we?

Do we attribute wrongdoings to some inner qualities of the wrongdoer partly because we want to distance ourselves from him? There is a controversy about the extent to which the Nazi leaders were aberrant and pathological (see Blass 1993: 38f.). It is quite possible that most of the Nazi leaders and Hitler's henchmen directly involved in killing and torturing were mentally ill. Regardless of this controversy, the dispositional approach fails to explain the obedience of the rank-and-file who run the Holocaust machine. A case in point is the Majdanek trial in Germany. Neighbors were reported to be quite startled when the camp guards were taking away by the police, accused and eventually convicted of horrible crimes. After the war, these men and women had apparently led the life of good citizens without any evident signs of mental disorder.

An interesting attempt to save the dispositional approach for the study of Nazism is made by Michael Selzner (1976). Selzner (1976: 216-220) acknowledges that attempts to explain Nazism as a result of distinctive lines of personality in abnormally large numbers of Germans have failed. Selzner (1976: 221-223) maintains instead that under certain circumstance it would be enough if only a small proportion of the population, something like 10 percent, possessed the psychological attributes of the Nazi personality. But this argument leads only to the question why those deviants were placed at the center of the political process in the first place.

A more recent example of this approach is Goldhagen (1996). In this case a whole nation was imbued with one zealous "eliminationist ideal". Whatever the merit of this argument, it fails to explain the post-war transformation of Germany.

While the approaches discussed so far search for inner characteristics of the perpetrators, the situational approach centers on the environment of the deed and the doer. A well-known proponent of this view is Stanley Milgram. His famous experiment, first carried out in 1960, is well known: A "teacher" is told to administer electoral shocks through a "teaching

machine" to the "learner" for each wrong answer. The "learner", of course, is an accomplice of the experimenter and it is the "teacher" who really is the subject of the experiment. The amount of obedience was not only both "disturbing", "surprising and dismaying" to Milgram (1992: 157; 1974: 5) himself: 65 % of the subjects continued to shock until they reached the upper end of the scale of the shock generator marked with an ominous "XXX" for 450 volts (Milgram 1974: 35)..

Milgram's experimental design has been altered in many ways. Results have varied according to the information given to the subject, the status of the experimenter, and the remoteness of the victim. The basic result, however, remains unchanged: many people follow orders to inflect pain on innocent victims. Even if we challenge the adequacy of Milgram's experiment, the haunting fact remains that people obey authorities, despite inner agony and even against their inner moral self (see the stunning description on this point by Milgram 1992: 147-150).

Compelling as this evidence is, the "following-orders-theses" is not wholly convincing either. For one thing, as Blass (1989: 34-37) points out, the fact remains that Milgram's model does not completely accommodate the historical details of the Holocaust itself. The "banality of evil" does hardly fit the SS men who served at Auschwitz. Hannah Arendt (in Naumann 1966: xxiv) herself, in her introduction about the 63-Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, reflected upon the hate-driven zealot whose sadistic destructiveness clearly transgressed all calls of "duty". Even Eichmann himself probably was not or not only the dutiful bureaucrat but one of the many officials who were quite innovative in how the destruction of the European Jews could be done even more efficiently. Sometimes such spontaneity was not even welcome at central offices in Berlin (Hilberg 1993: 266: see also Bernstein 1995: 14)).

These men were clearly more then the passive instruments for carrying out another persons's wishes as Milgram (1974: xii) envisions. Even if they were, the "following-order-thesis" cannot account for the emergence of social conditions in such a way that "ordinary people, simply doing ordinary jobs" (Milgram 1974: 6) became elements of a killing machine. The "following-order-thesis" also fails to explain why some people did not comply.

2. Altruism: Bystanders and Rescuers

We call a behavior "altruistic" when it is intended to benefit the well-being of others even at the risk of one owns well-being. As straight-forward and uncontroversial as such a definition may be, there are many conceptualization of altruism (cf. Batson 1991; Oliner et.al. 1992: Part 2; Monroe 1994). If there is an uncontroversial example of altruism, it is the rescue of Jews in Nazi Germany.

The research which directly examined the characteristics and motivations of the rescuers has progressed dramatically during the last decade (for a summary see Gushee 1993). For many of those who pursue this research it has a very personal meaning. Among those is Eva Fogelman, the daughter of Simach Fagelman, saved by a Russian baker. This is also true, by the way, for many students of group pressure and conformity (e.g. Kelman/Hamilton 1989: xi; Schopler 1994: 1). Incidentally, Fogelman happened to study with Stanley Milgram, later turning Milgram's question upside down: which people do not surrender personal responsibility for their actions to the authority? (Fogelman 1994: xix)

Fogelman identified five groups of rescuers (Fogelman 1994: 159ff.). The first group acted out of moral conviction; be it ideological, religious, or emotional. The second group can be called judeophiles. They held special relationships to individual Jews or to Jewishness as a whole. Then, there were network rescuers bound together by anti-Nazi rage. A fourth and rather small group of no more than 5 percent of all rescuers consisted of concerned processionals like doctors, nurses, or diplomats. A final group saved children.

Fogelman did not single out one common family background. But all rescuers experienced a warm and loving relationship with their parents who clearly had laid out rules about what was acceptable and what was not (Fogelman 1994: 253-270). Rescuer's parents provided a role model that bound together nurturing and altruism. These parents told their children that people are inextricably linked to one another.

This finding squares nicely with Oliner and Oliner's (1988) seminal study on the rescue question. This work clearly stands out because it carefully selected a sample of 406 rescuers and compared it with 126 nonhelpers and bystanders. Oliner and Oliner (1988) focus on the interaction between personal characteristics and situational factors as catalysts. What distinguished rescuer form non-rescuer was the ethical values of care and a predisposition to

accept a feeling of responsibility, and, more specifically a orientation of "extensivity". By this, the Oliners (1988: 183f., ch.10) mean a dual orientation toward attachments in face-to-face relationships as well as an inclusive sense of obligation to multiple groups.

These studies are of tremendous importance. They bear witness to the human ability to subvert destructive authorities. They show that something waas done, and more could have been done. They depict a wide variety of circumstances and personal backgrounds that led to rescue. This is a particularly important message to sociology since it points out that standard sociological variables such as status, class, age, and gender, in itself carry little predictive power. Just like the perpetrators, and just like the political resister, moral heroes came from all walks of life.

"Taken as a whole, however, the burden of evidence seems clearly to favor the view that enduring traits are not the distinguishing feature between those who were heroic and those who were obedient to an evil system" (Schopler 1994: 7). Consider just one figure from Oliner/Oliner (1988: 181f., Table 7.11). Even setting aside methodological questions (such as retrospective asking): 21% of the rescuer's parents relied on "inductive" discipline - discipline paired with arguments - compared to a figure of 6% for non rescuers. This is a highly significant difference at the .001 level. Nevertheless, this, and other factors like it, can neither be necessary because it leaves out 79% of the rescuers. Nor can it be sufficient. Otherwise "we would be counting [rescuers] in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions" (Paldiel 1988: 191). With about 700 million in Nazi-occupied territories, even a very optimistic estimate of five hundred thousand rescuers (cf. Gushee 1993: 373) leaves us with a total of less than one tenth of a percent.

Less research on the rescue question has been done using the situational approach. Rescuer, it seems, do stand out too much form their environment. But there is another venue of research in social psychology using the situational approach. It centers on the bystander-effect or the question why we don't help. Social psychology has intensively studied the bystander effect after the infamous Kitty-Genovese-incident. On March 13, 1964, twentyeight-year-old Catherine Genovese who was called Kitty by almost everybody in her New York neighborhood was on her way home from her job as a bar manager. It was at 3:30 am when she was attacked by a stranger just in front of her apartment complex. Thirty-eight onlookers in her Kew Gardens neighborhood were aroused by the screams of the young women

being stabbed to death. Many of them came to their windows and watched the gruel scene for as long as 35 minutes. No one called the police (Rosenthal 1968).

Again, our most obvious reaction to this case would be to explain the bystander's failure to intervene with their personal factors, apathy at best, cruelty at worst, hardened maybe by the coldness of the modern city life. Latané and Darley who have investigated this case and started a series of experiments to clarify the circumstances of helping behavior reject this view (Darley/Latané 1968: 383). In accordance with Milgram, Latané and Darley (1970: 115) concluded that personality is rather unimportant in determining people's decision to help or not to help. Correlates of helping behavior and socioeconomic factors or biographical differences are small to neglectable (Latané/Darley (1970: 117). In short, helping behavior is determined by specific circumstances, not by personality or life history.

Among the situational factors that have been shown to be most important are the number of bystanders, the ambiguity of the event and the possible diffusion of responsibility (for a summary see Myers 1990: 457-472). This findings hardly concur with Oliner and Oliner's (1988: 123, 127) insistence that rescuers and nonrescuers knew similar facts about the plight of the victims, perceived risks the same way, and had no more material resources at their avail that than non-helpers. One argument to resolve the contradicting evidence is to point to the tremendous differences in the actions involved and their consequences. There is a slight possibility that some bystander in the Kitty-Genovese murder did not call the police because they were afraid that a reported criminal may take revenge. Still, the risks involved in helping Jews were tremendously higher. Besides, the rescuer would not only endanger him or herself but also his or her family, friends, even the whole neighborhood. Secondly, the time frame for helping Jews was considerably longer than intervening in an emergency situation, although sometimes helpers were misled about the actual eventual cost of helping (e.g. Gross 1994: 470).

Psychologists have tried to simulate different costs of intervention and non-intervention experimentally and also, in a few exceptions, real dangerous life-situations (for a summary Worchel/Cooper/Goethals 1991: 275f., 283-278; Myers 1990: 471) In general, the likelihood of helping decreases as the costs to the bystander increases and as the cost to the victim for the bystander's failure to help decreases. While the influence of the first type of cost is in accordance with the low number of rescuers of Jews, the second type remains ambiguous.

One could argue that if a person is in great danger, as it was for the Jews in Nazi Germany, the cost to the victim if the bystander fails to help is tremendous, thus creating an incentive to help. One also could argue that the potential benefit the bystander can provide is not so great after all because in the end the Jewish refugee would be captured anyway, thus undermining the incentive to help.

This ambiguity points to a decisive difference between the context of bystander-emergency situations and the context of altruism in Nazi Germany: whereas help in the former context is usually - at least - not discouraged by prevailing norms and public authorities, Jewish non-help was sanctioned by the full might of a criminal, albeit governmental, power. From there, according to the sociological perspective, it seems to follow that neither questions of individual difference variables nor characteristic of the immediate situation are sufficient to explain the system wherein the act takes place.

3. A Sociological Approaches to Collective Evil

As we have seen, social psychological approaches on perpetrators and rescuers focus on individual traits, on situational factors, or on a combination of both. Overall, it seems, that the dispositional approach does not fare very well even when applied to extreme destructive and extreme altruistic behavior. There is a void between individual actions and the organized and authorized disaster. We are left with the fact that the greatest possible evil cannot be explained exclusively by the intentions and the motives of the` perpetrators nor by the non-decisions of the bystanders. We are also left with the fact that moral heroism, however laudable, is no remedy to sanctioned violence.

The situational approach fares better. But it neither cannot explain moral heroism and it has little to say about the quality of situational constraints in times of systematic moral disaster.

What has sociology to offer on this? Sociology is the scientific study of social relations, institutions, and the society at large (e.g. Smelser 1994). The central problem for sociology is the relationship of individual behavior (the micro-level) and systemic outcomes (the macro-level). How can individual actions and orientations become enforceable norms and firm

structures that, in turn, become constraints for individual decisions? In other words, sociology links individual actions and macro-social patterns.

Returning to our topic of courage and conformity, we have to ask what is the connection between ordinary individual's action and aggregate destruction. In other words: if we do not assume that all participating individuals were ideological zealots, sadistic aberrants, or paying every price for advancing their career then organized state crime such as the Holocaust is more than the aggregate sum of individual behavior. It is necessary to understand how diverse individual actions produces a collective outcome beyond the grasp of the diverse participants.

A first start to look at the Holocaust as an emerging process is to look at everyday-life and macrosocial constraints under conditions that lead to or include mass violence. In a further step, these two perspectives have to be combined and the interaction between the micro and the macro level to be spelled out. The following discussion is far from meeting this demands.

In what is not more than first attempt aimed at the problematic of collective evil, I will first ask about mechanisms enabling an ordinary life under conditions of increasing violence. In this respect, it is interesting to note how social historical accounts of everyday Nazi society have undergone dramatic changes the last twenty or so years.

First, the token of the "gleichgeschaltete Volksgemeinschaft" has been taken face value. It was either assumed that NS-ideology and organization uniformly produced consent and acceptance or that the all-encompassing repressive state apparatus left no room for private life. At any rate, both of these views saw Nazi Germany as one homogeneous social and political body (cf. Paul 1994).

In mid-seventies, a counter-position was formed. Under the headline of "everyday-life-history", fissions, contradictions and conflicts within the NS power claims were emphasized. Now, suddenly, it seemed that millions of Germans had somehow dissented, may-be not in outspoken words and deeds but in little actions of disapproval and in deviant forms of behaviors. In this view, reluctance became a marker of resistance and deviant behavior of opposition (for critique see Steinbach 1994: 44f., 63).

From a sociological point of view, neither the totalitarian vision nor the assumption of millions of little resisters is convincing. If not open approval, the very existence and dire

success of the Nazi state predicated upon compliance and conformity and suggests that everyday decisions made it happen. The crucial point is that power reproduces itself in everyday action (Popitz 1992). Some of the mechanisms at work have been demonstrated in empirical studies of social consciousness under socialist rule (the following paragraph draws heavily from Berking 1994). While different in many ways from Hitler's Germany, the experience of the socialist society aptly demonstrates that a regime can exist for a long time without the consent of its subjects.

One important maker for the socialist society was the split reality: the sharp distinction made between the private and the public life. To bow down to the demands of public demonstration of consensus and allegiance was made easier by the belief in the conduct of morally right life. De-politicization also encroached upon the sphere of politics and public function itself. Office-holders and political-cadres were approached by means of personal contacts, referring less to their function but as "good persons". That one has to give something for this kind of personal exchange, makes consent and quiescence seem "natural".

I am not equating "national" socialism with "real" socialism. The point I want to make is that people will try to lead an every day life under whatever kind of circumstances. They go about and mind there own business which may turn them into bystanders. They may reserve morality, solidarity, and empathy to the private sphere thus contributing to the "politics of exclusion" (Gamson 1995). In this way, each individual unintentionally undermines the likelihood of other bystanders to respond. Private virtues breed public harm.

Vice versa, under circumstances of keen leadership, existing networks and available resources, resistance could develop. While altruistic motivation of one kind or another was certainly necessary for Jewish rescue, collective activity probably plays a greater role than the Oliner's and other researchers who focus on the personality side assume. Given their own data Oliner and Oliner (1988: 141) too easily dismissed opportunity structures as one explanation of helping behavior: The fact that 68% of the rescuer compared with 25% of all non-rescuers were actively approached for help and that almost half of the rescuers were members of a resistance group (Oliner/Oliner 1988: 132, 137, Table 285) suggests an important collective dimension in the Jewish rescue. Indeed, the most recent research into rescue activities in France and Holland (N=174) "found very few instances of isolated, detached individuals from

organized activity." Rescue activities were, "by and large, organized activities, not loosely organized, as some researchers have claimed." (Gross 1994: 465).

Now let me just give an example regarding macrosocial constraints. One of the most astonishing accounts of the power of macroscopic factors is presented by Helen Fein (1979). Asking why there has not been more countervailing powers to Jewish victimization, she finds that in the 22 occupied or allied countries an astonishingly different percentage of Jews were killed. By singling out only two factors, the extent of pre-war anti-semitism and the degree of SS control in 1941, Fein accounted fo 86% of the variation of the survival rate (Fein 1975: 79-82, Table B-4, Appendix B).

Jewish rescue also varied with macrosocial constraints (Oberschall 1994). Although we may assume that potential altruists where present everywhere, rescue was more prevalent and effective where the occupied governments and civil society resisted the Nazi persecution and the implementation of the "final solution" one way or the other.

How can we bring the microsocial and macrosocial factors together? How can we connect individual behavior and its change over time to the evolution of a genocide system? Without any claim of comprehensiveness, I suggest four processes of particular importance: time-dynamics, disintegration, fragmentation, and entrapment.

a) Time-dynamics

Genocide evolves step-by-step. It does not happen out of nothing. Even if Hitler was determined to exterminate Jews, the Nazis most likely did not have a fixed plan for the "solution of the Jewish problem". They embarked on a road of anti-Jewish policies that eventually led to the "final solution". But the outcome was neither conceivable nor foreseeable when they came to power. This step-by-approach made it easier for the general population to comply with each single step and harder to decline the next one. As predicted by psychological models as just-world, balance or consistency theory, a mental attachment to the system is created.

In the first period of the Nazi-regime, one would, accidentally perhaps, overlook one's Jewish friend or acquaintance. Then, why taking the hassle to shop in Jewish shops? Other decisions and non-decisions were to follow. When to draw a line? "The continuum of destruction" (Staub 1993: 324) had started because with each single step chances increase that more serious demands to inflict harm will also be met. As such, it is a way to include criminal

activities in routine, everyday activities. Harm harbors more harm, and bystanders gradually transform into potential perpetrators. This dynamic works for perpetrators as well. The Nazis backed down to adverse reaction (such as the Hamburg incident when "German" wives publicly demanded - and succeeded the release of the Jewish husbands) they invariably grew boulder following little resistance. Needless to say that they almost never had to back down.

b) Disintegration

After take-over, the Nazis not only destroyed all opposing organizations but also friendly and sympathizing ones (e.g. certain youth groups). The only powerful and potential rival organization left, the army, was partly cajoled and partly co-opted. Together with terror and surveillance, this destruction of the civil society created extremely unfavorably conditions for any attempt at collective action. Under the headline of the social capital approach we recently only begin to recognize the importance of civil society for the moral basis of moral behavior.

c) Fragmentation

Between 1934 and 1944, most of the German population - including those who had not voted for Hitler - were not immediately threatened by official repression as long as they went along. The pogrom of the "shattered glasses" was not to be repeated because the regime sensed that most Germans did not like to watch acts of mass violence and public disturbance. Visible outburst of mass violence were abandoned, the identification, isolation and later destruction of Jewish and other targets became highly routinized. Gradually, Jews were removed form public life. Germans had a fair idea of what was going on in concentration camps but they were removed from direct visibility. The suspension of conditions of proximity paved the way for large-scale immorality (Vetlesen 1993).

Another aspect of fragmentation is division of labor. After the Khmer Rouge genocide we can we less sure if its effect, however. Nevertheless, industrial modern society at least requires a high degree of division of labor. Politically, it is organized in territorially bound sovereign nation-states. This unique combination is a precondition of industrialized genocide. From Horkheimer/Adorno (1982 [1944]) and Arendt (1979 [1950]) to Zygmund Baumann (1989), there is an ongoing debate whether the project of modernity in itself carries the seeds of Holocaust. Whether one subscribes to that view or not, it is evident that division of labor makes large-scale atrocities easier. The Holocaust is the collective result of many smaller steps. The town official does proper paperwork, the trainmaster only puts together train schedules (see

Hillberg 1993). Terror was the emergent outcome, not the necessary attendent property of the daily work. Routinization works, as Kelman and Hamilton (1989: 18) have remarked, not only on the organizational level but also at the level of the individual actors minimizing the inclination and the opportunity to raise moral questions.

d) Entrapment

Even before the war, many Germans were, in one way or the other, not just passive: they were "semiactive participants" in the system (Staub 1993: 315). As mentioned before, this undermined their ability to withdraw active or passive support for the system. What had begun as a mental attachment to the system, became a trap once the war had fully unfolded. At that stage, "the cycle of victims was tremendously enlarged beyond those who participated in the initial cycle of violence" (Staub 1993: 326). The Germans had good reasons to assume that they would become collectively the target of revenge whether they individually had supported or resisted Hitler. Drawn into the Holocaust and the brutal maltreatment of whole populations, especially in the occupied countries of East, soldiers and civilians, perpetrators and bystanders alike, perceived themselves now as possible victims. This condition made it very hard to break away from the Nazi regime until its very end.

Conclusion

Social psychology, combined with historical research, has made great headway in identifying personal and situational factors that help us to understand altruistic, passive, or violent behavior. But state-ordered genocide are more than the cumulative effect of individual actions. The understanding and explanation of individual motives is necessary but not sufficient for such large-scale atrocities.

If we view the Holocaust as a collective action phenomenon, sociology is suited to make a contribution to its analysis. I have offered four links between the individual level and the collective evil. Of course, they are not more than a very first and crude point of departure. Unfortunately, the creation of collective evil did not end with Nazi Germany. The four processes mentioned, can be at work in other times and places. But they also entail possibilities for prevention. There is hope that the evolution of genocide can be stopped at an early time:

- according to the dimension of time-dynamics, it is important to heed early warning signals (Newbury/Newbury 1994).

- Disintegration and break-down of the civil societies can be slowed down if a better sense of civil as well as of caring responsibility is installed (Staub 1993: 336).

- The dangers of fragmentation may be hardest to tackle. At least we can strive for more personal responsibility and try to promote independent judgement in authority situations (Kelman/Hamilton 1989: 321-339).

- Finally, entrapment can be minimized by not excluding the population of the enemy from the universe of obligation and by distinguishing between perpetrators and population (Gamson 1994: 7f.). It is where the family of nations perhaps has learned most. Serbs were told not to suffer for the deeds of their leader. To get rid of a handful of a leader cannot be shortcut for remorse and reconciliation.

Having said this, we are all aware that knowledge and remembrance alone does not produce countermeasures against potential genocide processes. As it were in the mid-thirties, countervailing powers against intervention are strong and effective means of prevention on the supranational level are still in their infancy. Moreover, looking at Auschwitz, all our knowledge will never be able to fathom what has happened. The unexplainable remains.

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