

Paralyzed Witnesses: The Murder They Heard

Stanley Milgram and Paul Hollander

Born in Budapest, Paul Hollander (1932–) went into hiding with his family toward the end of the Nazi occupation in 1944 and fled the country in 1956 after becoming disaffected with the Communist regime. He has remained an avid anti-Communist ever since. After graduating from the London School of Economics in 1959, Hollander came to the United States, where he earned a Ph.D. in sociology from Princeton University (1963). He is currently professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and serves as a Center Associate at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University. A prolific writer in sociology and political science, Hollander has published books on a wide range of topics, including *Soviet and American Society: A Comparison* (1972); *Anti-Americanism* (1992); and *Political Will and Personal Belief* (1999).

Dr. Stanley Milgram (1932–1984), a social psychologist at Yale University, is best known for his book *Obedience to Authority*, published in 1974. As a psychologist, Milgram studied why people act as they do. He was also interested in the behavior of Nazi war criminals, such as Eichmann, who was on trial at the time Milgram was conducting his research. As the atrocities committed by Nazis became well known after the war, many people wondered how so many human beings could inflict so much pain and death on other humans. Often the answer was simply, "I was just doing my duty" or "I was just fol-

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lowing orders." Milgram is best known for his experiment, which was designed to determine whether "ordinary" people would hurt others when ordered to do so, and why. In this selection about the infamous Kitty Genovese murder, Milgram and Hollander explore the reasons for neighbors' failure to help or even to call police while the young woman was being stabbed to death on the street below their apartment building.

Catherine Genovese, coming home from a night job in the early hours of a March morning, was stabbed repeatedly and over an extended period of time. Thirty-eight residents of a respectable New York City neighborhood admit to having witnessed at least a part of the attack, but not one of them went to her aid or even so much as called the police until after she was dead.

We are all certain that we would have done better. Our indignation toward the residents of Kew Gardens swells to a sense of outrage. The crime, or more precisely, the lack of civic response to it, was so vile that Senator (Richard B.) Russell of Georgia read *The New York Times* account of it into the *Congressional Record*. The fact that it was Senator Russell is an indication of the complex social reactions touched off by this neighborhood tragedy.

It is noteworthy, first, that anger is directed not toward the crime or the criminal, but toward those who failed to halt the criminal's actions. It is a curious shift, reminiscent of recent trends in moralizing about the Nazi era. Writers once focused on the sins of the Nazis; it is now more fashionable to discuss the complicity of their victims. The event is significant, also, for the way it is being exploited. Senator Russell is but one case in point. In his home state, several brutal murders of Negroes have taken place before large crowds of unprotesting white onlookers, but the Senator has never felt called upon to insert reports of these brutalities into the *Record*. The crime against Miss Genovese no longer exists in and of itself. It is rapidly being assimilated to the uses and ideologies of the day.

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For example, the Kew Gardens incident has become the occasion for a general attack on the city. It is portrayed as callous, cruel, indifferent to the needs of the people, and wholly inferior to the small town in the quality of its personal relationships. The abrasiveness of

urban life cannot be argued; it is not sure, however, that personal relationships are necessarily inferior in the city. They are merely organized on a different principle. Urban friendships and associations are not primarily formed on the basis of physical proximity. A person with numerous close friends in different parts of the city may not know the occupant of an adjacent apartment. Some hold this to be an advantage of the city: men and women can conduct lives unmonitored by the constant scrutiny of neighbors. This does not mean that a city dweller has fewer friends than does a villager or knows fewer persons who will come to his aid; however, it does mean that his allies are not constantly at hand. Miss Genovese required immediate aid from those physically present; her predicament was desperate and not typical of the occasions when we look for the support of friends. There is no evidence that the city had deprived Miss Genovese of human associations, but the friends who might have rushed to her side were miles from the scene of her tragedy.

A truly extraordinary aspect of the case is the general readiness to forget the man who committed a very foul crime. This is typical of social reactions in present-day America. It begins to seem that everyone, having absorbed a smattering of sociology, looks at once beyond the concrete case in an eager quest for high-sounding generalizations that imply an enlightened social vista. What gets lost in many of these discussions—and what needs at least a partial restoration—is the notion that people may occasionally be responsible for what they do, even if their acts are criminal. In our righteous denunciation of the thirty-eight witnesses, we should not forget that they did not commit the murder; they merely failed to prevent it. It is no more than clear thinking to bear in mind the moral difference.

A related and equally confusing error is to infer ethical values from the actual behavior of people in concrete situations. For example, in the case of Miss Genovese we must ask: did the witnesses remain passive because they thought it was the right thing to do, or did they refrain from action despite what they thought or felt they should do? We cannot take it for granted that people always do what they consider right. It would be more fruitful to inquire why, in general and in this particular case, there is so marked a discrepancy between values and behavior. What makes people choose a course of action that probably shames them in retrospect? How do they become reduced to resignation, acquiescence, and helplessness?

Those who vilify the residents of Kew Gardens measure them against the standard of their own ability to formulate high-minded moral prescriptions. But that is hardly a fair standard. It is entirely likely that many of the witnesses, at the level of stated opinion, feel quite as strongly as any of us about the moral requirement of aiding a helpless victim. They too, in general terms, know what ought to be done, and can state their values when the occasion arises. This has little, if anything, to do with actual behavior under the press of circumstances.

Furthermore, we must distinguish between the facts of the murder as finally known and reported in the press and the events of the evening as they were experienced by the Kew Gardens residents. We can now say that if the police had been called after the first attack, the woman's life might have been saved, and we tend to judge the inaction of the Kew Gardens residents in the light of this lost possibility. This is natural, perhaps, but it is unrealistic. If those men and women had had as clear a grasp of the situation as we have now, the chances are that many of them would have acted to save Miss Genovese's life. What they had, instead, were fragments of an ambiguous, confusing, and doubtless frightening episode—one, moreover, that seemed totally incongruous in a respectable neighborhood. The very lack of correspondence between the violence of the crime and the character of the neighborhood must have created a sense of unreality which inhibited rational action. A lesser crime, one more in character with the locale—say, after-hours rowdiness from a group of college students—might have led more readily to a call for the police.

The incongruity, the sheer improbability of the event predisposed many to reject the most extreme interpretation: that a young woman was in fact being murdered outside the window. How much more probable, not to say more consoling, was the interpretation that a drunken party was sounding off, that two lovers were quarreling, or that youths were playing a nasty prank. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Informed Heart* (1960), describes how resistant many German Jews were to the signs around them of impending disaster. Given any possibility for fitting events into an acceptable order of things, men are quick to seize it. It takes courage to perceive clearly and without distortion. We cannot justly condemn all the Kew Gardens residents in the light of a horrible outcome which only the most perspicacious could have foreseen.

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Why didn't the group of onlookers band together, run out into the street, and subdue the assailant? Aside from the fact that such organization takes time, and that the onlookers were not in communication (who in such a community knows his neighbor's phone number?), there is another factor that would render such action almost impossible. Despite our current fears about the contagion of violence in the mass media, the fact remains that the middle-class person is totally unequipped to deal with its actual occurrence. More especially, he is unable to use personal violence, either singly or collectively, even when it is required for productive and socially valued ends.

More generally, modern societies are so organized as to discourage even the most beneficial, spontaneous group action. This applies with particular sharpness to the law-abiding, respectable segments of the population—such as the people of Kew Gardens—who have most thoroughly accepted the admonition: "Do not take the law into your own hands." In a highly specialized society, such people take it for granted that certain functions and activities—from garbage collection to fire protection, from meat certification to the control of criminals—are taken care of by specially trained people. The puzzle in the case under consideration is the reluctance to supply to the police even the barest information which it was essential they have if they were to fulfill their acknowledged functions.

Many facts of the case have not been made public, such as the quality of the relationship between Miss Genovese and the community, the extent to which she was recognized that night, and the number of persons who knew her. It is known that her cries for help were not directed to a specific person: they were general. But only individuals can act, and as the cries were not specifically directed, no particular person felt a special responsibility. The crime and the failure of the community response seem absurd to us. At the time, it may well have seemed equally absurd to the Kew Gardens residents that not one of the neighbors would have called the police. A collective paralysis may have developed from the belief of each of the witnesses that someone else must surely have taken that obvious step.

If we ask why they did not call the police, we should also ask what were the alternatives. To be sure, phoning from within an apartment was the most prudent course of action, one involving the minimum of both physical inconvenience and personal involvement with a violent

criminal. And yet, one has to assume that in the minds of many there lurked the alternative of going down to the street and defending the helpless woman. This indeed might have been felt as the ideal response. By comparison, a mere phone call from the safety of home may have seemed a cowardly compromise with what should be done. As often happens, the ideal solution was difficult, probably dangerous; but, as also happens, the practical, safe alternative may have seemed distasteful in the light of the ideal. Awareness of an ideal response often paralyzes a move toward the less than ideal alternative. Rather than accept the belittling second-best, the person so beset prefers to blot out the whole issue. Therefore, he pretends that there is nothing to get upset about. Probably it was only a drunken brawl.

The symbolic significance of "the street" for the middle-class mentality may have some relevance to the case. Although it cannot explain in full the failure to grab the telephone and call the police, it may account in part for the inertia and indifference. For the middle-class resident of a big city, the street and what happens on the street are often symbolic of all that is vulgar and perilous in life. The street is the antithesis of privacy, security, and the support one derives from contemplating and living amidst prized personal possessions. The street represents the world of pushing and shoving crowds, potentially hostile strangers, sweat, dust, and noise. Those who spend much time on the street have nothing better to do and nowhere better to go; the poor, the footloose, the drifters, juvenile delinquents. Therefore, the middle-class person seeks almost automatically to disengage himself from the life of the street; he is on it only from necessity, rarely for pleasure. Such considerations help explain the genesis of attitudes that prevented the witnesses from making the crucial phone call. The tragic drama was taking place on the street, hence hardly relevant to their lives; in fact, in some ways radically opposed to their outlook and concerns.

In an effort to make the strongest possible case against the Kew Gardens citizens, the press ignored actual dangers of involvement, even at the level of calling the police. They have treated the "fears" of the residents as foolish rationalizations, utterly without basis. In doing so they have conveniently forgotten instances in which such involvement did not turn out well for the hero. One spectacular case in the early fifties, amply publicized by the press, concerned the misfortune of Arnold Schuster. While riding in the subway, this

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young Brooklyn man spotted Willie Sutton, an escaped criminal. He reported this information to the police, and it led to Sutton's arrest. Schuster was proclaimed a hero, but before a month was up Schuster was dead—murdered in reprisal for his part in Sutton's recapture. Schuster had done nothing more than phone the police.

* The fact is that there are risks even in minimal forms of involvement, and it is dishonest to ignore them. One becomes involved with the police, with the general agents of publicity that swarm to such events, and possibly with the criminal. If the criminal is not caught immediately, there is the chance that he will learn who called the police (which apartment did they enter first, whose pictures are in the papers, etc.) and may fear that the caller can identify him. The caller, then, is of special concern to the criminal. If a trial is held, the person who telephoned is likely to be a witness. Even if he is jailed, the criminal may have underworld friends who will act to avenge him. One is a responsible citizen and a worthy human being not because of the absence of risk but because one acts in the face of it.

In seeking explanations for their inaction, we have not intended to defend, certainly not to excuse, Kew Gardens' passive witnesses. We have sought, rather, to put ourselves in their place, to try to understand their response. The causes we have suggested are in no way sufficient reason for inaction. Perhaps we should have started with a more fundamental question: Why should anyone have gone to the aid of the victim? Why should anyone have taken the trouble to call the police? The answer must be that it is a matter of common decency to help those who are in distress. It is a humane and compassionate requirement in the relations between people. Yet how generally is it observed? In New York City it is not at all unusual to see a man, sick with alcohol, lying in a doorway; he does not command the least attention or interest from those who pass by. The trouble here, as in Kew Gardens, is that the individual does not perceive that his interests are identified with others or with the community at large. And is such a perception possible? What evidence is there in the American community that collective interests have priority over personal advantage?

There are, of course, practical limitations to the Samaritan impulse in a major city. If a citizen attended to every needy person, if he were sensitive to and acted on every altruistic impulse that was evoked in the city, he could scarcely keep his own affairs in order. A

calculated and strategic indifference is an unavoidable part of life in our cities, and it must be faced without sentimentality or rage. At most, each of us can resolve to extend the range of his responsibilities in some perceptible degree, to rise a little more adequately to moral obligations. City life is harsh; still, we owe it to ourselves and to our fellows to resolve that it be no more harsh than is inevitable.