Taking a New Look at a Familiar World

The primary claim of sociology is that our everyday feelings, thoughts, and actions are the product of a complex interplay between massive social forces and personal characteristics. We can’t understand the relationship between individuals and their societies without understanding the connection between both. As C. Wright Mills discusses in the introductory article, the “sociological imagination” is the ability to see the impact of social forces on our private lives. When we develop a sociological imagination, we gain an awareness that our lives unfold at the intersection of personal biography and social history. The sociological imagination encourages us to move beyond individualistic explanations of human experiences to an understanding of the mutual influence between individuals and society. So rather than study what goes on within people, sociologists study what goes on between and among people as individuals, groups, organizations, or entire societies. Sociology teaches us to look beyond individual personalities and focus instead on the influence of social phenomena in shaping our ideas of who we are and what we think we can do.

Peter Berger, another well-known sociologist, invites us to consider the uniqueness of the sociological enterprise. According to Berger, the sociologist is driven by an insatiable curiosity to understand the social conditions that shape human behavior. The sociologist is also prepared to be surprised, disturbed, and sometimes even bored by what he or she discovers. In this regard, the sociologist is driven to make sense of the seemingly obvious with the understanding that once explored, it may not be so obvious after all. One example of the nonobvious is the influence that social institutions have on our behavior. It’s not always easy to see this influence. We have a tendency to see people’s behavior in individualistic, sometimes even biological, terms. This tendency toward individualistic explanations is particularly pronounced in U.S. society.

The influence of social institutions on our personal lives is often felt most forcefully when we are compelled to obey the commands of someone who is in a position of institutional authority. The social institution with the most explicit hierarchy of authority is the military. In “The My Lai Massacre: A Military Crime of Obedience,” Herbert Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton describe a specific example of a crime in which the individuals involved attempted to deny responsibility for their actions by claiming that they were following the orders of a military officer who had the legitimate right to command them. This incident occurred in the midst of the Vietnam War. Arguably, people do things under such trying conditions that they wouldn’t ordinarily do, even—as in this case—kill defenseless people. Kelman and Hamilton make a key sociological point by showing that these soldiers were not necessarily psychological misfits who were especially mean or violent. Instead, the researchers argue, they were ordinary people caught up in tense circumstances that made obeying the brutal commands of an authority seem like the normal and morally acceptable thing to do.
Something to Consider as You Read

As you read these selections, consider the effects of social context and situation on behavior. Even though it might appear extreme, how might the behavior of these soldiers be similar to other examples of social influence? Consider occasions in which you have done something publicly that you didn't feel right about personally. How do you explain your behavior? How might a sociologist explain your behavior?
The Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills

(1959)

“The individual can . . . know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances.”

Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel.

Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies. The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.

Surely it is no wonder. In what period have so many men been so totally exposed at so fast a pace to such earthquakes of change? That Americans have not known such catastrophic changes as have the men and women of other societies is due to historical facts that are now quickly becoming “merely history.” The history that now affects every man is world history. Within this scene and this period, in the course of a single generation, one-sixth of mankind is transformed from all that is feudal and backward into all that is modern, advanced, and fearful. Political colonies are freed, new and less visible forms of imperialism installed. Revolutions occur; men feel the intimate grip of new kinds of authority. Totalitarian societies rise, and are smashed to bits—or succeed fabulously. After two centuries of ascendancy, capitalism is shown up as only one way to make society into an industrial apparatus. After two
centuries of hope, even formal democracy is restricted to a quite small portion of mankind. Everywhere in the underdeveloped world, ancient ways of life are broken up and vague expectations become urgent demands. Everywhere in the overdeveloped world, the means of authority and of violence become total in scope and bureaucratic in form. Humanity itself now lies before us, the super-nation at either pole concentrating its most coordinated and massive efforts upon the preparation of World War Three.

The very shaping of history now outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with cherished values. And which values? Even when they do not panic, men often sense that older ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis. Is it any wonder that ordinary men feel they cannot cope with the larger worlds with which they are so suddenly confronted? That they cannot understand the meaning of their epoch for their own lives? That—in defense of selfhood—they become morally insensible, trying to remain altogether private men? Is it any wonder that they come to be possessed by a sense of the trap?

It is not only information that they need—in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason that they need—although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality, I am going to contend, that journalists and scholars, artists and publics, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called the sociological imagination.

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues.

The first fruit of this imagination—and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. We do not know the limits of man’s capacities for supreme effort or willing degradation, for agony or glee, for pleasurable brutality or the sweetness of reason. But in our time we have come to know that the limits of “human nature” are frighteningly broad. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove.

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst. It is characteristic of Herbert Spencer—turgid, polysyllabic, comprehensive; of E. A. Ross—graceful, muckraking, upright; of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim; of the intricate and subtle Karl Mannheim. It is the quality of all that is intellectually excellent in Karl Marx; it is the clue to Thorstein Veblen’s brilliant and ironic insight, to Joseph Schumpeter’s many-sided constructions of
reality; it is the basis of the psychological sweep of W. E. H. Lecky no less than of the profundity and clarity of Max Weber. And it is the signal of what is best in contemporary studies of man and society.

No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey. Whatever the specific problems of the classic social analysts, however limited or however broad the features of social reality they have examined, those who have been imaginatively aware of the promise of their work have consistently asked three sorts of questions:

1. What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Within it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?

2. Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by, the historical period in which it moves? And this period—what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history making?

3. What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of “human nature” are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for “human nature” of each and every feature of the society we are examining?

Whether the point of interest is a great power state or a minor literary mood, a family, a prison, a creed—these are the kinds of questions the best social analysts have asked. They are the intellectual pivots of classic studies of man in society—and they are the questions inevitably raised by any mind possessing the sociological imagination. For that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being.

That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. In large part, contemporary man’s self-conscious view of himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of this self-consciousness. By its use men whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar. Correctly or incorrectly, they often come to feel that they can now provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations. Older decisions that once appeared sound now seem to them products of a mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again. They acquire a new way of thinking, they experience a transvaluation of values: in a word, by their reflection and by their sensibility, they realize the cultural meaning of the social sciences.
Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between “the personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure.” This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science.

Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware. Accordingly, the statement and the resolution of troubles properly lie within the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu—the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity. A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by him to be threatened.

Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened. Often there is a debate about what that value really is and about what it is that really threatens it. This debate is often without focus if only because it is the very nature of an issue, unlike even widespread trouble, that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments of ordinary men. An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements, and often too it involves what Marxists call “contradictions” or “antagonisms.”

In these terms, consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.

Consider war. The personal problem of war, when it occurs, may be how to survive it or how to die in it with honor; how to make money out of it; how to climb into the higher safety of the military apparatus; or how to contribute to the war’s termination. In short, according to one’s values, to find a set of milieux and within it to survive the war or make one’s death in it meaningful. But the structural issues of war have to do with its causes; with what types of men it throws up into command; with its effects upon economic and political, family, and religious institutions, with the unorganized irresponsibility of a world of nation-states.

Consider marriage. Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four years of marriage is 250 out of every 1,000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them.

Or consider the metropolis—the horrible, beautiful, ugly, magnificent sprawl of the great city. For many upper-class people, the personal solution to “the problem of the city” is to have an apartment with private garage under it in the heart of the city, and forty miles out, a house by Henry Hill, garden by Garrett Eckbo, on a hundred acres of private land. In these two controlled environments—with a small staff at each end and a private helicopter connection—most people could solve many of the problems of personal milieux caused by the facts of the city. But all this, however splendid, does not solve the public issues that the structural fact of the city poses. What should be done with this wonderful monstrosity? Break it all up into scattered units, combining residence and work? Refurbish it as
it stands? Or, after evacuation, dynamite it and build new cities according to new plans in new places? What should those plans be? And who is to decide and to accomplish whatever choice is made? These are structural issues; to confront them and to solve them requires us to consider political and economic issues that affect innumerable milieux.

Insofar as an economy is so arranged that slumps occur, the problem of unemployment becomes incapable of personal solution. Insofar as war is inherent in the nation-state system and in the uneven industrialization of the world, the ordinary individual in his restricted milieu will be powerless—with or without psychiatric aid—to solve the troubles this system or lack of system imposes upon him. Insofar as the family as an institution turns women into darling little slaves and men into their chief providers and unweaned dependents, the problem of a satisfactory marriage remains incapable of purely private solution. Insofar as the overdeveloped megalopolis and the overdeveloped automobile are built-in features of the overdeveloped society, the issues of urban living will not be solved by personal ingenuity and private wealth.

What we experience in various and specific milieux, I have noted, is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieux we are required to look beyond them. And the number and variety of such structural changes increase as the institutions within which we live become more embracing and more intricately connected with one another. To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination.

**THINKING ABOUT THE READING**

Consider the political, economic, familial, and cultural circumstances into which you were born. Make a list of some of these circumstances and also some of the major historical events that have occurred in your lifetime. How do you think these historical and social circumstances may have affected your personal biography? Can you think of ways in which your actions have influenced the course of other people’s lives? Identify some famous people and consider how the intersection of history and biography led them to their particular position. How might the outcome have differed if some of the circumstances in their lives were different?
We would say then that the sociologist (that is, the one we would really like to invite to our game) is a person intensively, endlessly, shamelessly interested in the doings of men. His natural habitat is all the human gathering places of the world, wherever men* come together. The sociologist may be interested in many other things. But his consuming interest remains in the world of men, their institutions, their history, their passions. He will naturally be interested in the events that engage men’s ultimate beliefs, their moments of tragedy and grandeur and ecstasy. But he will also be fascinated by the commonplace, the everyday. He will know reverence, but this reverence will not prevent him from wanting to see and to understand. He may sometimes feel revulsion or contempt. But this also will not deter him from wanting to have his questions answered. The sociologist, in his quest for understanding, moves through the world of men without respect for the usual lines of demarcation. Nobility and degradation, power and obscurity, intelligence and folly—these are equally interesting to him, however unequal they may be in his personal values or tastes. Thus his questions may lead him to all possible levels of society, the best and the least known places, the most respected and the most despised. And, if he is a good sociologist, he will find himself in all these places because his own questions have so taken possession of him that he has little choice but to seek for answers.

We could say that the sociologist, but for the grace of his academic title, is the man who must listen to gossip despite himself, who is tempted to look through keyholes, to read other people’s mail, to open closed cabinets. What interests us is the curiosity that grips any sociologist in front of a closed door behind which there are human voices. If he is a good sociologist, he will want to open that door, to understand these voices. Behind each closed door he will anticipate some new facet of human life not yet perceived and understood.

The sociologist will occupy himself with matters that others regard as too sacred or as too distasteful for dispassionate investigation. He will find rewarding the company of priests or of prostitutes, depending not on his personal preferences but on the questions he happens to be asking at the moment. He will also concern himself with matters that others may find much too boring. He will be interested in the human interaction that goes with warfare or with great intellectual discoveries, but also in the relations between people employed in a restaurant or between a group of little girls playing with their dolls. His main focus of attention is not the ultimate significance of what men do, but the action in itself, as another example of the infinite richness of human conduct.

In these journeys through the world of men the sociologist will inevitably encounter other professional Peeping Toms. Sometimes these will resent his presence, feeling that he is poaching on their preserves. In some places the sociologist will meet up with the economist, in others with the political scientist, in yet others with the psychologist or the ethnologist. Yet chances are that the questions

*To be understood as people or persons.
that have brought him to these same places are different from the ones that propelled his fellow trespassers. The sociologist’s questions always remain essentially the same: “What are people doing with each other here?” “What are their relationships to each other?” “How are these relationships organized in institutions?” “What are the collective ideas that move men and institutions?” In trying to answer these questions in specific instances, the sociologist will, of course, have to deal with economic or political matters, but he will do so in a way rather different from that of the economist or the political scientist. The scene that he contemplates is the same human scene that these other scientists concern themselves with. But the sociologist’s angle of vision is different.

Much of the time the sociologist moves in sectors of experience that are familiar to him and to most people in his society. He investigates communities, institutions and activities that one can read about every day in the newspapers. Yet there is another excitement of discovery beckoning in his investigations. It is not the excitement of coming upon the totally unfamiliar, but rather the excitement of finding the familiar becoming transformed in its meaning. The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives. This also constitutes a transformation of consciousness. Moreover, this transformation is more relevant existentially than that of many other intellectual disciplines, because it is more difficult to segregate in some special compartment of the mind. The astronomer does not live in the remote galaxies, and the nuclear physicist can, outside his laboratory, eat and laugh and marry and vote without thinking about the insides of the atom. The geologist looks at rocks only at appropriate times, and the linguist speaks English with his wife. The sociologist lives in society, on the job and off it. His own life, inevitably, is part of his subject matter. Men being what they are, sociologists too manage to segregate their professional insights from their everyday affairs. But it is a rather difficult feat to perform in good faith.

The sociologist moves in the common world of men, close to what most of them would call real. The categories he employs in his analyses are only refinements of the categories by which other men live—power, class, status, race, ethnicity. As a result, there is a deceptive simplicity and obviousness about some sociological investigations. One reads them, nods at the familiar scene, remarks that one has heard all this before and don’t people have better things to do than to waste their time on truisms—until one is suddenly brought up against an insight that radically questions everything one had previously assumed about this familiar scene. This is the point at which one begins to sense the excitement of sociology.

Let us take a specific example. Imagine a sociology class in a Southern college where almost all the students are white Southerners. Imagine a lecture on the subject of the racial system of the South. The lecturer is talking here of matters that have been familiar to his students from the time of their infancy. Indeed, it may be that they are much more familiar with the minutiae of this system than he is. They are quite bored as a result. It seems to them that he is only using more pretentious words to describe what they already know. Thus he may use the term “caste,” one commonly used now by American sociologists to describe the Southern racial system. But in explaining the term he shifts to traditional Hindu society, to make it clearer. He then goes on to analyze the magical beliefs inherent in caste tabus, the social dynamics of commensalism and connubium, the economic interests concealed within the system, the way in which religious beliefs relate to the tabus, the effects of the caste system upon the industrial development of the society and vice versa—all in India. But suddenly India is not very far away at all. The lecture then goes back to its Southern theme. The familiar now seems not quite so familiar anymore. Questions are raised that are new, perhaps
raised angrily, but raised all the same. And at least some of the students have begun to understand that there are functions involved in this business of race that they have not read about in the newspapers (at least not those in their hometowns) and that their parents have not told them—partly, at least, because neither the newspapers nor the parents knew about them.

It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem. This too is a deceptively simple statement. It ceases to be simple after a while. Social reality turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole.

Anthropologists use the term “culture shock” to describe the impact of a totally new culture upon a newcomer. In an extreme instance such shock will be experienced by the Western explorer who is told, halfway through dinner, that he is eating the nice old lady he had been chatting with the previous day—a shock with predictable physiological if not moral consequences. Most explorers no longer encounter cannibalism in their travels today. However, the first encounters with polygamy or with puberty rites or even with the way some nations drive their automobiles can be quite a shock to an American visitor. With the shock may go not only disapproval or disgust but a sense of excitement that things can really be that different from what they are at home. To some extent, at least, this is the excitement of any first travel abroad. The experience of sociological discovery could be described as “culture shock” minus geographical displacement. In other words, the sociologist travels at home—with shocking results. He is unlikely to find that he is eating a nice old lady for dinner. But the discovery, for instance, that his own church has considerable money invested in the missile industry or that a few blocks from his home there are people who engage in cultic orgies may not be drastically different in emotional impact. Yet we would not want to imply that sociological discoveries are always or even usually outrageous to moral sentiment. Not at all. What they have in common with exploration in distant lands, however, is the sudden illumination of new and unsuspected facets of human existence in society. This is the excitement and . . . the humanistic justification of sociology.

People who like to avoid shocking discoveries, who prefer to believe that society is just what they were taught in Sunday School, who like the safety of the rules and the maxims of what Alfred Schuetz has called the “world-taken-for-granted,” should stay away from sociology. People who feel no temptation before closed doors, who have no curiosity about human beings, who are content to admire scenery without wondering about the people who live in those houses on the other side of that river, should probably also stay away from sociology. They will find it unpleasant or, at any rate, unrewarding. People who are interested in human beings only if they can change, convert or reform them should also be warned, for they will find sociology much less useful than they hoped. And people whose interest is mainly in their own conceptual constructions will do just as well to turn to the study of little white mice. Sociology will be satisfying, in the long run, only to those who can think of nothing more entrancing than to watch men and to understand things human.

It may now be clear that we have, albeit deliberately, understated the case in the title of this chapter. To be sure, sociology is an individual pastime in the sense that it interests some men and bores others. Some like to observe human beings, others to experiment with mice. The world is big enough to hold all kinds and there is no logical priority for one interest as against another. But the word “pastime” is weak in describing what we mean. Sociology is more like a passion. The sociological perspective is more like a demon that possesses one, that drives one compellingly, again and again, to the questions that are its own. An introduction to sociology is, therefore, an invitation to a very special kind of passion.
THINKING ABOUT THE READING

Peter Berger claims that sociologists are tempted to listen to gossip, peek through keyholes, and look at other people’s mail. This can be interpreted to mean that the sociologist has an insatiable curiosity about other people. What are some other behaviors and situations that might capture the attention of the sociologist? How does the sociologist differ from the psychologist or the economist or the historian? Are these fields of study likely to be in competition with sociology or to complement it?
March 16, 1968, was a busy day in U.S. history. Stateside, Robert F. Kennedy announced his presidential candidacy, challenging a sitting president from his own party—in part out of opposition to an undeclared and disastrous war. In Vietnam, the war continued. In many ways, March 16 may have been a typical day in that war. We will probably never know. But we do know that on that day a typical company went on a mission—which may or may not have been typical—to a village called Son (or Song) My. Most of what is remembered from that mission occurred in the subhamlet known to Americans as My Lai 4.

The My Lai massacre was investigated and charges were brought in 1969 and 1970. Trials and disciplinary actions lasted into 1971. Entire books have been written about the army’s year-long cover-up of the massacre (for example, Hersh, 1972), and the cover-up was a major focus of the army’s own investigation of the incident. Our central concern here is the massacre itself—a crime of obedience—and public reactions to such crimes, rather than the lengths to which many went to deny the event. Therefore this account concentrates on one day: March 16, 1968.

Many verbal testimonials to the horrors that occurred at My Lai were available. More unusual was the fact that an army photographer, Ronald Haeberle, was assigned the task of documenting the anticipated military engagement at My Lai—and documented a massacre instead. Later, as the story of the massacre emerged, his photographs were widely distributed and seared the public conscience. What might have been dismissed as unreal or exaggerated was depicted in photographs of demonstrable authenticity. The dominant image appeared on the cover of Life: piles of bodies jumbled together in a ditch along a trail—the dead all apparently unarmed. All were Oriental, and all appeared to be children, women, or old men. Clearly there had been a mass execution, one whose image would not quickly fade.

So many bodies (over twenty in the cover photo alone) are hard to imagine as the handiwork of one killer. These were not. They were the product of what we call a crime of obedience. Crimes of obedience begin with orders. But orders are often vague and rarely survive with any clarity the transition from one authority down a chain of subordinates to the ultimate actors. The operation at Son My was no exception.

“Charlie” Company, Company C, under Lt. Col. Frank Barker’s command, arrived in Vietnam in December 1967. As the army’s investigative unit, directed by Lt. Gen. William R. Peers, characterized the personnel, they “contained no significant deviation from the average” for the time. Seymour S. Hersh (1970) described the “average” more explicitly: “Most of the men in Charlie Company had volunteered for the draft; only a few had gone to college for even one year. Nearly half were black, with a few Mexican-Americans. Most were eighteen to twenty-two years old. The favorite reading matter of Charlie Company, like that of other line infantry units in Vietnam, was comic books” (p. 18). The action at My Lai, like that throughout Vietnam, was fought by a cross-section of those Americans who
either believed in the war or lacked the social resources to avoid participating in it. Charlie Company was indeed average for that time, that place, and that war.

Two key figures in Charlie Company were more unusual. The company's commander, Capt. Ernest Medina, was an upwardly mobile Mexican-American who wanted to make the army his career, although he feared that he might never advance beyond captain because of his lack of formal education. His eagerness had earned him a nickname among his men: “Mad Dog Medina.” One of his admirers was the platoon leader Second Lt. William L. Calley, Jr., an undistinguished, five-foot-three-inch junior-college dropout who had failed four of the seven courses in which he had enrolled his first year. Many viewed him as one of those “instant officers” made possible only by the army’s then-desperate need for manpower. Whatever the cause, he was an insecure leader whose frequent claim was “I’m the boss.” His nickname among some of the troops was “Surfside 5½,” a reference to the swashbuckling heroes of a popular television show, “Surfside 6.”

The Son My operation was planned by Lieutenant Colonel Barker and his staff as a search-and-destroy mission with the objective of rooting out the Forty-eighth Viet Cong Battalion from their base area of Son My village. Apparently no written orders were ever issued. Barker’s superior, Col. Oran Henderson, arrived at the staging point the day before. Among the issues he reviewed with the assembled officers were some of the weaknesses of prior operations by their units, including their failure to be appropriately aggressive in pursuit of the enemy. Later briefings by Lieutenant Colonel Barker and his staff asserted that no one except Viet Cong was expected to be in the village after 7 a.m. on the following day. The “innocent” would all be at the market. Those present at the briefings gave conflicting accounts of Barker’s exact orders, but he conveyed at least a strong suggestion that the Son My area was to be obliterated. As the army’s inquiry reported: “While there is some conflict in the testimony as to whether LTC Barker ordered the destruction of houses, dwellings, livestock, and other foodstuffs in the Song My area, the preponderance of the evidence indicates that such destruction was implied, if not specifically directed, by his orders of 15 March” (Peers Report, in Goldstein et al., 1976, p. 94).

Evidence that Barker ordered the killing of civilians is even more murky. What does seem clear, however, is that—having asserted that civilians would be away at the market—he did not specify what was to be done with any who might nevertheless be found on the scene. The Peers Report therefore considered it “reasonable to conclude that LTC Barker’s minimal or nonexistent instructions concerning the handling of noncombatants created the potential for grave misunderstandings as to his intentions and for interpretation of his orders as authority to fire, without restriction, on all persons found in target area” (Goldstein et al., 1976, p. 95). Since Barker was killed in action in June 1968, his own formal version of the truth was never available.

Charlie Company’s Captain Medina was briefed for the operation by Barker and his staff. He then transmitted the already vague orders to his own men. Charlie Company was spoiling for a fight, having been totally frustrated during its months in Vietnam—first by waiting for battles that never came, then by incompetent forays led by inexperienced commanders, and finally by mines and booby traps. In fact, the emotion-laden funeral of a sergeant killed by a booby trap was held on March 15, the day before My Lai. Captain Medina gave the orders for the next day’s action at the close of that funeral. Many were in a mood for revenge.

It is again unclear what was ordered. Although all participants were alive by the time of the trials for the massacre, they were either on trial or probably felt under threat of trial. Memories are often flawed and self-serving at such times. It is apparent that Medina relayed to the men at least some of Barker’s general message—to expect Viet Cong resistance, to burn, and to kill livestock. It is not clear that he
ordered the slaughter of the inhabitants, but some of the men who heard him thought he had. One of those who claimed to have heard such orders was Lt. William Calley.

As March 16 dawned, much was expected of the operation by those who had set it into motion. Therefore a full complement of “brass” was present in helicopters overhead, including Barker, Colonel Henderson, and their superior, Major General Koster (who went on to become commandant of West Point before the story of My Lai broke). On the ground, the troops were to carry with them one reporter and one photographer to immortalize the anticipated battle.

The action for Company C began at 7:30 as their first wave of helicopters touched down near the subhamlet of My Lai 4. By 7:47 all of Company C was present and set to fight. But instead of the Viet Cong Forty-eighth Battalion, My Lai was filled with the old men, women, and children who were supposed to have gone to market. By this time, in their version of the war, and with whatever orders they thought they had heard, the men from Company C were nevertheless ready to find Viet Cong everywhere. By nightfall, the official tally was 128 VC killed and three weapons captured, although later, unofficial body counts ran as high as 500. The operation at Son My was over. And by nightfall, as Hersh reported: “the Viet Cong were back in My Lai 4, helping the survivors bury the dead. It took five days. Most of the funeral speeches were made by the Communist guerrillas. Nguyen Bat was not a Communist at the time of the massacre, but the incident changed his mind. ‘After the shooting,’ he said, ‘all the villagers became Communists’” (1970, p. 74). To this day, the memory of the massacre is kept alive by markers and plaques designating the spots where groups of villagers were killed, by a large statue, and by the My Lai Museum, established in 1975 (Williams, 1985).

But what could have happened to leave American troops reporting a victory over Viet Cong when in fact they had killed hundreds of noncombatants? It is not hard to explain the report of victory; that is the essence of a cover-up. It is harder to understand how the killings came to be committed in the first place, making a cover-up necessary.

**Mass Executions and the Defense of Superior Orders**

Some of the atrocities on March 16, 1968, were evidently unofficial, spontaneous acts: rapes, tortures, killings. For example, Hersh (1970) describes Charlie Company’s Second Platoon as entering “My Lai 4 with guns blazing” (p. 50); more graphically, Lieutenant “Brooks and his men in the second platoon to the north had begun to systematically ransack the hamlet and slaughter the people, kill the livestock, and destroy the crops. Men poured rifle and machine-gun fire into huts without knowing—or seemingly caring—who was inside” (pp. 49–50).

Some atrocities toward the end of the action were part of an almost casual “mopping-up,” much of which was the responsibility of Lieutenant LaCross’s Third Platoon of Charlie Company. The Peers Report states: “The entire 3rd Platoon then began moving into the western edge of My Lai (4), for the mop-up operation… . The squad . . . began to burn the houses in the southwestern portion of the hamlet” (Goldstein et al., 1976, p. 133). They became mingled with other platoons during a series of rapes and killings of survivors for which it was impossible to fix responsibility. Certainly to a Vietnamese all GIs would by this point look alike: “Nineteen-year-old Nguyen Thi Ngoc Tuyet watched a baby trying to open her slain mother’s blouse to nurse. A soldier shot the infant while it was struggling with the blouse, and then slashed it with his bayonet.” Tuyet also said she saw another baby hacked to death by GIs wielding their bayonets. “Le Tong, a twenty-eight-year-old rice farmer, reported seeing one woman raped after GIs killed her children. Nguyen Khoa, a thirty-seven-year-old peasant, told of a thirteen-year-old girl who was raped before being killed. GIs then attacked Khoa’s wife, tearing off her clothes. Before they could rape her, however, Khoa said, their six-year-old son, riddled with
bullets, fell and saturated her with blood. The GIs left her alone” (Hersh, 1970, p. 72). All of Company C was implicated in a pattern of death and destruction throughout the hamlet, much of which seemingly lacked rhyme or reason.

But a substantial amount of the killing was organized and traceable to one authority: the First Platoon’s Lt. William Calley. Calley was originally charged with 109 killings, almost all of them mass executions at the trail and other locations. He stood trial for 102 of these killings, was convicted of 22 in 1971, and at first received a life sentence. Though others—both superior and subordinate to Calley—were brought to trial, he was the only one convicted for the My Lai crimes. Thus, the only actions of My Lai for which anyone was ever convicted were mass executions, ordered and committed. We suspect that there are commonsense reasons why this one type of killing was singled out. In the midst of rapidly moving events with people running about, an execution of stationary targets is literally a still life that stands out and whose participants are clearly visible. It can be proven that specific people committed specific deeds. An execution, in contrast to the shooting of someone on the run, is also more likely to meet the legal definition of an act resulting from intent—with malice aforethought. Moreover, American military law specifically forbids the killing of unarmed noncombatants or prisoners whom one has disarmed. The pictures of the trail victims at My Lai certainly portrayed one or the other of these. Such an action would be illegal under military law; ordering another to commit such an action would be illegal; and following such an order would be illegal.

But following an order may provide a second and pivotal justification for an act that would be murder when committed by a civilian. American military law assumes that the subordinate is inclined to follow orders, as that is the normal obligation of the role. Hence, legally, obedient subordinates are protected from unreasonable expectations regarding their capacity to evaluate those orders:

An order requiring the performance of a military duty may be inferred to be legal. An act performed manifestly beyond the scope of authority, or pursuant to an order that a man of ordinary sense and understanding would know to be illegal, or in a wanton manner in the discharge of a lawful duty, is not excusable. (Par. 216, Subpar. d, Manual for Courts Martial, United States, 1969 Rev.)

Thus what may be excusable is the good-faith carrying out of an order, as long as that order appears to the ordinary soldier to be a legal one. In military law, invoking superior orders moves the question from one of the action’s consequences—the body count—to one of evaluating the actor’s motives and good sense.

In sum, if anyone is to be brought to justice for a massacre, common sense and legal codes decree that the most appropriate targets

without justification or excuse, unlawfully kills a human being, when he—

1. has a premeditated design to kill;
2. intends to kill or inflict great bodily harm;
3. is engaged in an act which is inherently dangerous to others and evinces a wanton disregard of human life; or
4. is engaged in the perpetration or attempted perpetration of burglary, sodomy, rape, robbery, or aggravated arson. (Goldstein et al., 1976, p. 507)

For a soldier, one legal justification for killing is warfare; but warfare is subject to many legal limits and restrictions, including, of course, the inadmissibility of killing unarmed noncombatants or prisoners whom one has disarmed. The pictures of the trail victims at My Lai certainly portrayed one or the other of these. Such an action would be illegal under military law; ordering another to commit such an action would be illegal; and following such an order would be illegal.
are those who make themselves executioners. This is the kind of target the government selected in prosecuting Lieutenant Calley with the greatest fervor. And in a military context, the most promising way in which one can redefine one’s undeniable deeds into acceptability is to invoke superior orders. This is what Calley did in attempting to avoid conviction. Since the core legal issues involved points of mass execution—the ditches and trail where America’s image of My Lai was formed—we review these events in greater detail.

The day’s quiet beginning has already been noted. Troops landed and swept unopposed into the village. The three weapons eventually reported as the haul from the operation were picked up from three apparent Viet Cong who fled the village when the troops arrived and were pursued and killed by helicopter gunships. Obviously the Viet Cong did frequent the area. But it appears that by about 8:00 a.m. no one who met the troops was aggressive, and no one was armed. By the laws of war Charlie Company had no argument with such people.

As they moved into the village, the soldiers began to gather its inhabitants together. Shortly after 8:00 a.m. Lieutenant Calley told Pfc. Paul Meadlo that “you know what to do with” a group of villagers Meadlo was guarding. Estimates of the numbers in the group ranged as high as eighty women, children, and old men, and Meadlo’s own estimate under oath was thirty to fifty people. As Meadlo later testified, Calley returned after ten or fifteen minutes: “He [Calley] said, ‘How come they’re not dead?’ I said, ‘I didn’t know we were supposed to kill them.’ He said, ‘I want them dead.’ He backed off twenty or thirty feet and started shooting into the people—the Viet Cong—shooting automatic. He was beside me. He burned four or five magazines. I burned off a few, about three. I helped shoot ‘em” (Hammer, 1971, p. 125).

At the trial, the first specification in the murder charge against Calley was for this incident; he was accused of premeditated murder of “an unknown number, not less than 30, Oriental human beings, males and females of various ages, whose names are unknown, occupants of the village of My Lai 4, by means of shooting them with a rifle” (Goldstein et al., 1976, p. 497).

Among the helicopters flying reconnaissance above Son My was that of CWO Hugh Thompson. By 9:00 or soon after, Thompson had noticed some horrifying events from his perch. As he spotted wounded civilians, he sent down smoke markers so that soldiers on the ground could treat them. They killed them instead. He reported to headquarters, trying to persuade someone to stop what was going on. Barker, hearing the message, called down to Captain Medina. Medina, in turn, later claimed to have told Calley that it was “enough for today.” But it was not yet enough.

At Calley’s orders, his men began gathering the remaining villagers—roughly seventy-five individuals, mostly women and children—and herding them toward a drainage ditch. Accompanied by three or four enlisted men, Lieutenant Calley executed several batches of civilians who had been gathered into ditches. Some of the details of the process were entered into testimony in such accounts as Pfc. Dennis Conti’s: “A lot of them, the people, were trying to get up and mostly they was just screaming and pretty bad shot up. . . . I seen a woman tried to get up. I seen Lieutenant Calley fire. He hit the side of her head and blew it off” (Hammer, 1971, p. 125).

Testimony by other soldiers presented the shooting’s aftermath. Specialist Four Charles Hall, asked by Prosecutor Aubrey Daniel how he knew the people in the ditch were dead, said: “There was blood coming from them. They were just scattered all over the ground in the ditch, some in piles and some scattered out 20, 25 meters perhaps up the ditch. . . . They were very old people, very young children, and mothers. . . . There was blood all over them” (Goldstein et al., 1976, pp. 501–502). And Pfc.
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Gregory Olsen corroborated the general picture of the victims: “They were—the majority were women and children, some babies. I distinctly remember one middle-aged Vietnamese male dressed in white right at my feet as I crossed. None of the bodies were mangled in any way. There was blood. Some appeared to be dead, others followed me with their eyes as I walked across the ditch” (Goldstein et al., 1976, p. 502).

The second specification in the murder charge stated that Calley did “with premeditation, murder an unknown number of Oriental human beings, not less than seventy, males and females of various ages, whose names are unknown, occupants of the village of My Lai 4, by means of shooting them with a rifle” (Goldstein et al., 1976, p. 497). Calley was also charged with and tried for shootings of individuals (an old man and a child); these charges were clearly supplemental to the main issue at trial—the mass killings and how they came about.

It is noteworthy that during these executions more than one enlisted man avoided carrying out Calley’s orders, and more than one, by sworn oath, directly refused to obey them. For example, Pfc. James Joseph Dursi testified, when asked if he fired when Lieutenant Calley ordered him to: “No I just stood there. Meadlo turned to me after a couple of minutes and said ‘Shoot! Why don’t you shoot! Why don’t you fire!’ He was crying and yelling. I said, ‘I can’t! I won’t!’ And the people were screaming and crying and yelling. They kept firing for a couple of minutes, mostly automatic and semi-automatic” (Hammer, 1971, p. 143) . . .

Disobedience of Lieutenant Calley’s own orders to kill represented a serious legal and moral threat to a defense based on superior orders, such as Calley was attempting. This defense had to assert that the orders seemed reasonable enough to carry out; that they appeared to be legal orders. Even if the orders in question were not legal, the defense had to assert that an ordinary individual could not and should not be expected to see the distinction. In short, if what happened was “business as usual,” even though it might be bad business, then the defendant stood a chance of acquittal. But under direct command from “Surfside 5½,” some ordinary enlisted men managed to refuse, to avoid, or at least to stop doing what they were ordered to do. As “reasonable men” of “ordinary sense and understanding,” they had apparently found something awry that morning; and it would have been hard for an officer to plead successfully that he was more ordinary than his men in his capacity to evaluate the reasonableness of orders.

Even those who obeyed Calley’s orders showed great stress. For example, Meadlo eventually began to argue and cry directly in front of Calley. Pfc. Herbert Carter shot himself in the foot, possibly because he could no longer take what he was doing. We were not destined to hear a sworn version of the incident, since neither side at the Calley trial called him to testify.

The most unusual instance of resistance to authority came from the skies. CWO Hugh Thompson, who had protested the apparent carnage of civilians, was Calley’s inferior in rank but was not in his line of command. He was also watching the ditch from his helicopter and noticed some people moving after the first round of slaughter—chiefly children who had been shielded by their mothers’ bodies. Landing to rescue the wounded, he also found some villagers hiding in a nearby bunker. Protecting the Vietnamese with his own body, Thompson ordered his men to train their guns on the Americans and to open fire if the Americans fired on the Vietnamese. He then radioed for additional rescue helicopters and stood between the Vietnamese and the Americans under Calley’s command until the Vietnamese could be evacuated. He later returned to the ditch to unearth a child buried, unharmed, beneath layers of bodies. In October 1969, Thompson was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism at My Lai, specifically (albeit inaccurately) for the rescue of children hiding in a bunker “between Viet Cong forces and advancing friendly forces” and for the rescue of a wounded child “caught in the intense crossfire” (Hersh, 1970, p. 119). Four months earlier, at the Pentagon, Thompson had identified Calley as having been at the ditch.
By about 10:00 a.m., the massacre was winding down. The remaining actions consisted largely of isolated rapes and killings, “clean-up” shootings of the wounded, and the destruction of the village by fire. We have already seen some examples of these more indiscriminate and possibly less premeditated acts. By the 11:00 a.m. lunch break, when the exhausted men of Company C were relaxing, two young girls wandered back from a hiding place only to be invited to share lunch. This surrealist touch illustrates the extent to which the soldiers’ action had become dissociated from its meaning. An hour earlier, some of these men were making sure that not even a child would escape the executioner’s bullet. But now the job was done and it was time for lunch—and in this new context it seemed only natural to ask the children who had managed to escape execution to join them. The massacre had ended. It remained only for the Viet Cong to reap the political rewards among the survivors in hiding.

The army command in the area knew that something had gone wrong. Direct commanders, including Lieutenant Colonel Barker, had firsthand reports, such as Thompson’s complaints. Others had such odd bits of evidence as the claim of 128 Viet Cong dead with a booty of only three weapons. But the cover-up of My Lai began at once. The operation was reported as a victory over a stronghold of the Viet Cong Forty-eighth.

William Calley was not the only man tried for the event at My Lai. The actions of over thirty soldiers and civilians were scrutinized by investigators; over half of these had to face charges or disciplinary action of some sort. Targets of investigation included Captain Medina, who was tried, and various higher-ups, including General Koster. But Lieutenant Calley was the only person convicted, the only person to serve time.

The core of Lieutenant Calley’s defense was superior orders. What this meant to him—in contrast to what it meant to the judge and jury—can be gleaned from his responses to a series of questions from his defense attorney, George Latimer, in which Calley sketched out his understanding of the laws of war and the actions that constitute doing one’s duty within those laws:

Latimer: Did you receive any training which had to do with the obedience to orders?
Calley: Yes, sir.

Latimer: . . . what were you informed [were] the principles involved in that field?
Calley: That all orders were to be assumed legal, that the soldier’s job was to carry out any order given him to the best of his ability.

Latimer: . . . what might occur if you disobeyed an order by a senior officer?
Calley: You could be court-martialed for refusing an order and refusing an order in the face of the enemy, you could be sent to death, sir.

Latimer: [I am asking] whether you were required in any way, shape or form to make a determination of the legality or illegality of an order?
Calley: No, sir. I was never told that I had the choice, sir.

Latimer: If you had a doubt about the order, what were you supposed to do?
Calley: . . . I was supposed to carry the order out and then come back and make my complaint. (Hammer, 1971, pp. 240–241)

Lieutenant Calley steadfastly maintained that his actions within My Lai had constituted, in his mind, carrying out orders from Captain Medina. Both his own actions and the orders he gave to others (such as the instruction to Meadlo to “waste ’em”) were entirely in response to superior orders. He denied any intent to kill individuals and any but the most passing awareness of distinctions among the individuals: “I was ordered to go in there and destroy the enemy. That was my job on that day. That was the mission I was given. I did not sit down and think in terms of men, women,
and children. They were all classified the same, and that was the classification that we dealt with, just as enemy soldiers.” When Latimer asked if in his own opinion Calley had acted “rightly and according to your understanding of your directions and orders,” Calley replied, “I felt then and I still do that I acted as I was directed, and I carried out the orders that I was given, and I do not feel wrong in doing so, sir” (Hammer, 1971, p. 257).

His court-martial did not accept Calley’s defense of superior orders and clearly did not share his interpretation of his duty. The jury evidently reasoned that, even if there had been orders to destroy everything in sight and to “waste the Vietnamese,” any reasonable person would have realized that such orders were illegal and should have refused to carry them out. The defense of superior orders under such conditions is inadmissible under international and military law. The U.S. Army’s *Law of Land Warfare* (Dept. of the Army, 1956), for example, states that “the fact that the law of war has been violated pursuant to an order of a superior authority, whether military or civil, does not deprive the act in question of its character of a war crime, nor does it constitute a defense in the trial of an accused individual, unless he did not know and could not reasonably have been expected to know that the act was unlawful” and that “members of the armed forces are bound to obey only lawful orders” (in Falk et al., 1971, pp. 71–72).

The disagreement between Calley and the court-martial seems to have revolved around the definition of the responsibilities of a subordinate to obey, on the one hand, and to evaluate, on the other. This tension . . . can best be captured via the charge to the jury in the Calley court-martial, made by the trial judge, Col. Reid Kennedy. The forty-one pages of the charge include the following:

> Both combatants captured by and non-combatants detained by the opposing force . . . have the right to be treated as prisoners. . . . Summary execution of detainees or prisoners is forbidden by law. . . . I therefore instruct you . . . that if unresisting human beings were killed at My Lai (4) while within the effective custody and control of our military forces, their deaths cannot be considered justified. . . . Thus if you find that Lieutenant Calley received an order directing him to kill unresisting Vietnamese within his control or within the control of his troops, that order would be an illegal order.

A determination that an order is illegal does not, of itself, assign criminal responsibility to the person following the order for acts done in compliance with it. Soldiers are taught to follow orders, and special attention is given to obedience of orders on the battlefield. Military effectiveness depends on obedience to orders. On the other hand, the obedience of a soldier is not the obedience of an automaton. A soldier is a reasoning agent, obliged to respond, not as a machine, but as a person. The law takes these factors into account in assessing criminal responsibility for acts done in compliance with illegal orders.

The acts of a subordinate done in compliance with an unlawful order given him by his superior are excused and impose no criminal liability upon him unless the superior’s order is one which a man of ordinary sense and understanding would, under the circumstances, know to be unlawful, or if the order in question is actually known to the accused to be unlawful. (Goldstein et al., 1976, pp. 525–526; emphasis added)

By this definition, subordinates take part in a balancing act, one tipped toward obedience but tempered by “ordinary sense and understanding.”

A jury of combat veterans proceeded to convict William Calley of the premeditated murder of no less than twenty-two human beings. (The army, realizing some unfortunate connotations in referring to the victims as “Oriental human beings,” eventually referred to them as “human beings.”) Regarding the first specification in the murder charge, the bodies on the trail, [Calley] was convicted of premeditated murder of not less than one
person. (Medical testimony had been able to
pinpoint only one person whose wounds as
revealed in Haeberle’s photos were sure to be
immediately fatal.) Regarding the second spec-
ification, the bodies in the ditch, Calley was
convicted of the premeditated murder of not
less than twenty human beings. Regarding
additional specifications that he had killed an
old man and a child, Calley was convicted of
premeditated murder in the first case and of
assault with intent to commit murder in the
second.

Lieutenant Calley was initially sentenced
to life imprisonment. That sentence was
reduced: first to twenty years, eventually to ten
(the latter by Secretary of Defense Callaway in
1974). Calley served three years before being
released on bond. The time was spent under
house arrest in his apartment, where he was
able to receive visits from his girlfriend. He was
granted parole on September 10, 1975.

Sanctioned Massacres

The slaughter at My Lai is an instance of a class
of violent acts that can be described as sanc-
tioned massacres (Kelman, 1973): acts of
indiscriminate, ruthless, and often systematic
mass violence, carried out by military or para-
military personnel while engaged in officially
sanctioned campaigns, the victims of which
are defenseless and unresisting civilians,
including old men, women, and children.
Sanctioned massacres have occurred through-
out history. Within American history, My Lai
had its precursors in the Philippine war around
the turn of the century (Schirmer, 1971) and in
the massacres of American Indians. Elsewhere
in the world, one recalls the Nazis’ “final solu-
tion” for European Jews, the massacres and
deportations of Armenians by Turks, the
liquidation of the kulaks and the great purges
in the Soviet Union, and more recently the
massacres in Indonesia and Bangladesh, in
Biafra and Burundi, in South Africa and
Mozambique, in Cambodia and Afghanistan,
in Syria and Lebanon. . . .

The occurrence of sanctioned massacres
cannot be adequately explained by the exist-
ence of psychological forces—whether these
be characterological dispositions to engage in
murderous violence or profound hostility
against the target—so powerful that they must
find expression in violent acts unhampered by
moral restraints. Instead, the major instigators
for this class of violence derive from the policy
process. The question that really calls for psy-
chological analysis is why so many people are
willing to formulate, participate in, and con-
done policies that call for the mass killings of
defenseless civilians. Thus it is more instruc-
tive to look not at the motives for violence but
at the conditions under which the usual moral
inhibitions against violence become weakened.
Three social processes that tend to create such
conditions can be identified: authorization,
routinization, and dehumanization. Through
authorization, the situation becomes so
defined that the individual is absolved of the
responsibility to make personal moral choices.
Through routinization, the action becomes so
organized that there is no opportunity for rais-
ing moral questions. Through dehumaniza-
tion, the actors’ attitudes toward the target and
toward themselves become so structured that
it is neither necessary nor possible for them to
view the relationship in moral terms.

Authorization

Sanctioned massacres by definition occur in
the context of an authority situation, a situa-
tion in which, at least for many of the partici-
pants, the moral principles that generally
govern human relationships do not apply. Thus,
when acts of violence are explicitly ordered,
implicitly encouraged, tacitly approved, or at
least permitted by legitimate authorities,
people’s readiness to commit or condone them
is enhanced. That such acts are authorized
seems to carry automatic justification for
them. Behaviorally, authorization obviates the
necessity of making judgments or choices.
Not only do normal moral principles become
Inoperative, but—particularly when the actions are explicitly ordered—a different kind of morality, linked to the duty to obey superior orders, tends to take over.

In an authority situation, individuals characteristically feel obligated to obey the orders of the authorities, whether or not these correspond with their personal preferences. They see themselves as having no choice as long as they accept the legitimacy of the orders and of the authorities who give them. Individuals differ considerably in the degree to which—and the conditions under which—they are prepared to challenge the legitimacy of an order on the grounds that the order itself is illegal, or that those giving it have overstepped their authority, or that it stems from a policy that violates fundamental societal values. Regardless of such individual differences, however, the basic structure of a situation of legitimate authority requires subordinates to respond in terms of their role obligations rather than their personal preferences; they can openly disobey only by challenging the legitimacy of the authority. Often people obey without question even though the behavior they engage in may entail great personal sacrifice or great harm to others.

An important corollary of the basic structure of the authority situation is that actors often do not see themselves as personally responsible for the consequences of their actions. Again, there are individual differences, depending on actors’ capacity and readiness to evaluate the legitimacy of orders received. Insofar as they see themselves as having had no choice in their actions, however, they do not feel personally responsible for them. They were not personal agents, but merely extensions of the authority. Thus, when their actions cause harm to others, they can feel relatively free of guilt. A similar mechanism operates when a person engages in antisocial behavior that was not ordered by the authorities but was tacitly encouraged and approved by them—even if only by making it clear that such behavior will not be punished. In this situation, behavior that was formerly illegitimate is legitimized by the authorities’ acquiescence.

In the My Lai massacre, it is likely that the structure of the authority situation contributed to the massive violence in both ways—that is, by conveying the message that acts of violence against Vietnamese villagers were required, as well as the message that such acts, even if not ordered, were permitted by the authorities in charge. The actions at My Lai represented, at least in some respects, responses to explicit or implicit orders. Lieutenant Calley indicated, by orders and by example, that he wanted large numbers of villagers killed. Whether Calley himself had been ordered by his superiors to “waste” the whole area, as he claimed, remains a matter of controversy. Even if we assume, however, that he was not explicitly ordered to wipe out the village, he had reason to believe that such actions were expected by his superior officers. Indeed, the very nature of the war conveyed this expectation. The principal measure of military success was the “body count”—the number of enemy soldiers killed—and any Vietnamese killed by the U.S. military was commonly defined as a “Viet Cong.” Thus, it was not totally bizarre for Calley to believe that what he was doing at My Lai was to increase his body count, as any good officer was expected to do.

Even to the extent that the actions at My Lai occurred spontaneously, without reference to superior orders, those committing them had reason to assume that such actions might be tacitly approved of by the military authorities. Not only had they failed to punish such acts in most cases, but the very strategies and tactics that the authorities consistently devised were based on the proposition that the civilian population of South Vietnam—whether “hostile” or “friendly”—was expendable. Such policies as search-and-destroy missions, the establishment of free-shooting zones, the use of antipersonnel weapons, the bombing of entire villages if they were suspected of harboring guerrillas, the forced migration of masses of the rural population, and the defoliation of vast forest areas helped legitimize acts of massive violence of the kind occurring at My Lai.

Some of the actions at My Lai suggest an orientation to authority based on unquestioning
obedience to superior orders, no matter how destructive the actions these orders call for. Such obedience is specifically fostered in the course of military training and reinforced by the structure of the military authority situation. It also reflects, however, an ideological orientation that may be more widespread in the general population.

**Routinization**

Authorization processes create a situation in which people become involved in an action without considering its implications and without really making a decision. Once they have taken the initial step, they are in a new psychological and social situation in which the pressures to continue are powerful. As Lewin (1947) has pointed out, many forces that might originally have kept people out of a situation reverse direction once they have made a commitment (once they have gone through the “gate region”) and now serve to keep them in the situation. For example, concern about the criminal nature of an action, which might originally have inhibited a person from becoming involved, may now lead to deeper involvement in efforts to justify the action and to avoid negative consequences.

Despite these forces, however, given the nature of the actions involved in sanctioned massacres, one might still expect moral scruples to intervene; but the likelihood of moral resistance is greatly reduced by transforming the action into routine, mechanical, highly programmed operations. Routinization fulfills two functions. First, it reduces the necessity of making decisions, thus minimizing the occasions in which moral questions may arise. Second, it makes it easier to avoid the implications of the action, since the actor focuses on the details of the job rather than on its meaning. The latter effect is more readily achieved among those who participate in sanctioned massacres from a distance—from their desks or even from the cockpits of their bombers.

Routinization operates both at the level of the individual actor and at the organizational level. Individual job performance is broken down into a series of discrete steps, most of them carried out in automatic, regularized fashion. It becomes easy to forget the nature of the product that emerges from this process. When Lieutenant Calley said of My Lai that it was “no great deal,” he probably implied that it was all in a day’s work. Organizationally, the task is divided among different offices, each of which has responsibility for a small portion of it. This arrangement diffuses responsibility and limits the amount and scope of decision making that is necessary. There is no expectation that the moral implications will be considered at any of these points, nor is there any opportunity to do so. The organizational processes also help further legitimize the actions of each participant. By proceeding in routine fashion—processing papers, exchanging memos, diligently carrying out their assigned tasks—the different units mutually reinforce each other in the view that what is going on must be perfectly normal, correct, and legitimate. The shared illusion that they are engaged in a legitimate enterprise helps the participants assimilate their activities to other purposes, such as the efficiency of their performance, the productivity of their unit, or the cohesiveness of their group (see Janis, 1972).

Normalization of atrocities is more difficult to the extent that there are constant reminders of the true meaning of the enterprise. Bureaucratic inventiveness in the use of language helps to cover up such meaning. For example, the SS had a set of *Sprachregelungen*, or “language rules,” to govern descriptions of their extermination program. As Arendt (1964) points out, the term *language rule* in itself was “a code name; it meant what in ordinary language would be called a lie” (p. 85). The code names for killing and liquidation were “final solution,” “evacuation,” and “special treatment.” The war in Indochina produced its own set of euphemisms, such as “protective reaction,” “pacification,” and “forced-draft urbanization and modernization.” The use of euphemisms allows participants in sanctioned massacres to differentiate their actions from
ordinary killing and destruction and thus to avoid confronting their true meaning.

**Dehumanization**

Authorization processes override standard moral considerations; routinization processes reduce the likelihood that such considerations will arise. Still, the inhibitions against murdering one's fellow human beings are generally so strong that the victims must also be stripped of their human status if they are to be subjected to systematic killing. Insofar as they are dehumanized, the usual principles of morality no longer apply to them.

Sanctioned massacres become possible to the extent that the victims are deprived in the perpetrators’ eyes of the two qualities essential to being perceived as fully human and included in the moral compact that governs human relationships: *identity*—standing as independent, distinctive individuals, capable of making choices and entitled to live their own lives—and *community*—fellow membership in an interconnected network of individuals who care for each other and respect each other’s individuality and rights (Kelman, 1973; see also Bakan, 1966, for a related distinction between “agency” and “communion”). Thus, when a group of people is defined entirely in terms of a category to which they belong, and when this category is excluded from the human family, moral restraints against killing them are more readily overcome.

Dehumanization of the enemy is a common phenomenon in any war situation. Sanctioned massacres, however, presuppose a more extreme degree of dehumanization, insofar as the killing is not in direct response to the target’s threats or provocations. It is not what they have done that marks such victims for death but who they are—the category to which they happen to belong. They are the victims of policies that regard their systematic destruction as a desirable end or an acceptable means. Such extreme dehumanization becomes possible when the target group can readily be identified as a separate category of people who have historically been stigmatized and excluded by the victimizers; often the victims belong to a distinct racial, religious, ethnic, or political group regarded as inferior or sinister. The traditions, the habits, the images, and the vocabularies for dehumanizing such groups are already well established and can be drawn upon when the groups are selected for massacre. Labels help deprive the victims of identity and community, as in the epithet “gooks” that was commonly used to refer to Vietnamese and other Indochinese peoples.

The dynamics of the massacre process itself further increase the participants’ tendency to dehumanize their victims. Those who participate as part of the bureaucratic apparatus increasingly come to see their victims as bodies to be counted and entered into their reports, as faceless figures that will determine their productivity rates and promotions. Those who participate in the massacre directly—in the field, as it were—are reinforced in their perception of the victims as less than human by observing their very victimization. The only way they can justify what is being done to these people—both by others and by themselves—and the only way they can extract some degree of meaning out of the absurd events in which they find themselves participating (see Lifton, 1971, 1973) is by coming to believe that the victims are subhuman and deserve to be rooted out. And thus the process of dehumanization feeds on itself.

**REFERENCES**


According to Kelman and Hamilton, social processes can create conditions under which usual restraints against violence are weakened. What social processes were in evidence during the My Lai massacre? The incident they describe provides us with an uncomfortable picture of human nature. Do you think most people would have reacted the way the soldiers at My Lai did? Are we all potential massacrers? Does the phenomenon of obedience to authority go beyond the tightly structured environment of the military? Can you think of incidents in your own life when you’ve done something—perhaps harmed or humiliated another person—because of the powerful influence of others? How might Kelman and Hamilton explain the actions of the individuals who carried out the hijackings and attacks of September 11, 2001, or of the American soldiers who abused Iraqi prisoners in their custody?
Seeing and Thinking Sociologically

Where is society located? This is an intriguing question. Society shapes our behavior and beliefs through social institutions such as religion, law, education, economics, and family. At the same time, we shape society through our interactions with one another and our participation in social institutions. In this way, we can say that society exists as an objective entity that transcends us. But it is also a construction that is created, reaffirmed, and altered through everyday interactions and behavior. Humans are social beings. We constantly look to others to help define and interpret the situations in which we find ourselves. Other people can influence what we see, feel, think, and do. But it’s not just other people who influence us. We also live in a society, which consists of socially recognizable combinations of individuals—relationships, groups, and organizations—as well as the products of human action—statuses, roles, culture, and institutions. When we behave, we do so in a social context that consists of a combination of institutional arrangements, cultural influences, and interpersonal expectations. Thus, our behavior in any given situation is our own, but the reasons we do what we do are rooted in these more complex social factors.

The social context in which we reside—urban, rural, suburban, exurban, institutional—greatly influences and shapes our social interaction and individual experiences. In “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Georg Simmel uses the urban environment to investigate the social forces that affect a person’s individuality and relationships. He shows how the urban environment challenges our sense of independence and individuality and pushes us toward a very calculative and rational approach to life. The path we take as individuals in constructing the architecture of our social environment is one shaped by these influential social forces of time and place.

As social beings, the mutual exchange between society and the individual is especially evident in our social interactions with others. In “Gift and Exchange,” Zygmunt Bauman explores the “gift-exchange” choice that individuals face on a daily basis in their social interaction. While he observes that self-interest drives our exchanges in certain moments, the needs and rights of other individuals control our exchanges at other times. In short, depending on the context, our social needs may pull us toward belonging or individuality, but in the end, we find that one without the other leaves us feeling unsettled in our social environment.

This social structure provides us with a sense of order in our daily lives. But sometimes that order breaks down. In “Culture of Fear,” Barry Glassner shows us how the news media functions to create a culture that the public takes for granted. He focuses, in particular, on the emotion of fear in U.S. society. We constantly hear horror stories about such urgent social problems as deadly diseases, violent strangers, and out-of-control teens. But Glassner points out that the terrified public concern over certain issues is often inflated by the media and largely unwarranted. Ironically, when we live in a culture of fear, our most serious problems often go ignored.
Something to Consider as You Read

When reading the selections in this section, consider how “society” is defined and characterized. Is it something “out there,” some invisible force that makes us behave in certain ways? What does it look like? How do you know it when you see it? Sociologists view society as the beliefs, practices, rules, and institutions that shape our lives. For example, consider certain practices of “gift exchange” that you use in your own life. How did you learn these practices? Why do you do them? What meaning do they have for you? Consider further the “rules of the road” that you follow when driving in traffic. Where did those come from? Why do people follow them? Sociologists explore these kinds of questions to understand the underlying patterns of structures that make up what we call “society.”
The Metropolis and Mental Life

Georg Simmel
(1903)

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life.

This intellectualistic quality which is thus recognized as a protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis, becomes ramified into numerous specific phenomena. The metropolis has always been the seat of money economy because the many-sidedness and concentration of commercial activity have given the medium of exchange an importance which it could not have acquired in the commercial aspects of rural life. But money economy and the domination of the intellect stand in the closest relationship to one another. They have in common a purely matter-of-fact attitude in the treatment of persons and things in which a formal justice is often combined with an unrelenting hardness. The purely intellectualistic person is indifferent to all things personal because, out of them, relationships and reactions develop which are not to be completely understood by purely rational methods—just as the unique element in events never enters into the principle of money. Money is concerned only with what is common to all, i.e., with the exchange value which reduces all quality and individuality to a purely quantitative level. All emotional relationships between persons rest on their individuality, whereas intellectual relationships deal with persons as with numbers, that is, as with elements which, in themselves, are indifferent, but which are of interest only insofar as they offer something objectively perceivable. It is in this very manner that the inhabitant of the metropolis reckons with his merchant, his customer, and with his servant, and frequently with the persons with whom he is thrown into obligatory association. These relationships stand in distinct contrast with the nature of the smaller circle in which the inevitable knowledge of individual characteristics produces, with an equal inevitability, an emotional tone in conduct, a sphere which is beyond the mere objective weighting of tasks performed and payments made. What is essential here as regards the economic-psychological aspect of the problem is that in less advanced cultures production was for the customer who ordered the product so that the producer and the purchaser knew one another. The modern city, however, is supplied almost exclusively by production for the market, that is, for entirely unknown purchasers who never appear in the actual field of vision of the producers themselves. Thereby, the interests of each party acquire a relentless matter-of-factness, and its rationally calculated economic egoism need not fear any divergence from its set path because of the imponderability of personal relationships. This is all the more the case in the money economy which dominates the metropolis in which the last remnants of domestic production and direct barter of goods have been eradicated and in which the amount of production on direct personal order is reduced daily. Furthermore, this psychological intellectualistic attitude and the money economy are in such close integration that no one is able to say whether it was the former that effected the latter or vice versa. What is certain is only that the form of life in the metropolis is the soil which nourishes this interaction most fruitfully, a
point which I shall attempt to demonstrate only with the statement of the most outstanding English constitutional historian to the effect that through the entire course of English history London has never acted as the heart of England but often as its intellect and always as its money bag.

In certain apparently insignificant characters or traits of the most external aspects of life are to be found a number of characteristic mental tendencies. The modern mind has become more and more a calculating one. The calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money economy corresponds to the ideal of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a mathematical formula. It has been money economy which has thus filled the daily life of so many people with weighing, calculating, enumerating and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms. Because of the character of calculability which money has there has come into the relationships of the elements of life a precision and a degree of certainty in the definition of the equalities and inequalities and an unambiguousness in agreements and arrangements, just as externally this precision has been brought about through the general diffusion of pocket watches. It is, however, the conditions of the metropolis which are cause as well as effect for this essential characteristic. The relationships and concerns of the typical metropolitan resident are so manifold and complex that, especially as a result of the agglomeration of so many persons with such differentiated interests, their relationships and activities intertwine with one another into a many-membered organism. In view of this fact, the lack of the most exact punctuality in promises and performances would cause the whole to break down into an inextricable chaos. If all the watches in Berlin suddenly went wrong in different ways even only as much as an hour, its entire economic and commercial life would be derailed for some time. Even though this may seem more superficial in its significance, it transpires that the magnitude of distances results in making all waiting and the breaking of appointments an ill-afforded waste of time. For this reason the technique of metropolitan life in general is not conceivable without all of its activities and reciprocal relationships being organized and coordinated in the most punctual way into a firmly fixed framework of time which transcends all subjective elements. But here too there emerge those conclusions which are in general the whole task of this discussion, namely, that every event, however restricted to this superficial level it may appear, comes immediately into contact with the depths of the soul, and that the most banal externalities are, in the last analysis, bound up with the final decisions concerning the meaning and the style of life. Punctuality, calculability, and exactness, which are required by the complications and extensiveness of metropolitan life are not only most intimately connected with its capitalistic and intellectualistic character but also color the content of life and are conductive to the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign human traits and impulses which originally seek to determine the form of life from within instead of receiving it from the outside in a general, schematically precise form. Even though those lives which are autonomous and characterized by these vital impulses are not entirely impossible in the city, they are, none the less, opposed to it in abstracto.

The same factors which, in the exactness and the minute precision of the form of life, have coalesced into a structure of the highest impersonality, have, on the other hand, an influence in a highly personal direction. There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook. It is at first the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves which are thrown together in all their contrasts and from which it seems to us the intensification of metropolitan intellectuality seems to be derived. On that account it is not likely that stupid persons who have been hitherto intellectually dead will be blasé. Just as an immoderately sensuous life makes one blasé...
because it stimulates the nerves to their utmost reactivity until they finally can no longer produce any reaction at all, so, less harmful stimuli, through the rapidity and the contradictoriness of their shifts, force the nerves to make such violent responses, tear them about so brutally that they exhaust their last reserves of strength and, remaining in the same milieu, do not have time for new reserves to form. This incapacity to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy constitutes in fact that blasé attitude which every child of a large city evinces when compared with the products of the more peaceful and more stable milieu.

Combined with this physiological source of the blasé metropolitan attitude there is another which derives from a money economy. The essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things. Not in the sense that they are not perceived, as is the case of mental dullness, but rather that the meaning and the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless. They appear to the blasé person in a homogeneous, flat and gray color with no one of them worthy of being preferred to another. This psychic mood is the correct subjective reflection of a complete money economy to the extent that money takes the place of all the manifoldness of things and expresses all qualitative distinctions between them in the distinction of “how much.” To the extent that money, with its colorlessness and its indifferent quality, can become a common denominator of all values it becomes the frightful leveler—it hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair. They all float with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money. They all rest on the same level and are distinguished only by their amounts. In individual cases this coloring, or rather this decoloring of things, through their equation with money, may be imperceptibly small. In the relationship, however, which the wealthy person has to objects which can be bought for money, perhaps indeed in the total character which, for this reason, public opinion now recognizes in these objects, it takes on very considerable proportions. This is why the metropolis is the seat of commerce and it is in it that the purchasability of things appears in quite a different aspect than in simpler economies. It is also the peculiar seat of the blasé attitude. In it is brought to a peak, in a certain way, that achievement in the concentration of purchasable things which stimulates the individual to the highest degree of nervous energy. Through the mere quantitative intensification of the same conditions this achievement is transformed into its opposite, into this peculiar adaptive phenomenon—the blasé attitude—in which the nerves reveal their final possibility of adjusting themselves to the content and the form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them. We see that the self-preservation of certain types of personalities is obtained at the cost of devaluing the entire objective world, ending inevitably in dragging the personality downward into a feeling of its own valuelessness.

Cities are above all the seat of the most advanced economic division of labor. They produce such extreme phenomena as the lucrative vocation of the quatorzième in Paris. These are persons who may be recognized by shields on their houses and who hold themselves ready at the dinner hour in appropriate costumes so they can be called upon on short notice in case thirteen persons find themselves at the table. Exactly in the measure of its extension the city offers to an increasing degree the determining conditions for the division of labor. It is a unit which, because of its large size, is receptive to a highly diversified plurality of achievements while at the same time the agglomeration of individuals and their struggle for the customer forces the individual to a type of specialized accomplishment in which he cannot be so easily exterminated by the other. The decisive fact here is that in the life of a city, struggle with nature for the means of life is transformed into a conflict with human beings and the gain which is fought for is granted, not by
nature, but by man. For here we find not only the previously mentioned source of specialization but rather the deeper one in which the seller must seek to produce in the person to whom he wishes to sell ever new and unique needs. The necessity to specialize one’s product in order to find a source of income which is not yet exhausted and also to specialize a function which cannot be easily supplanted is conducive to differentiation, refinement and enrichment of the needs of the public which obviously must lead to increasing personal variation within this public.

All this leads to the narrower type of intellectual individuation of mental qualities to which the city gives rise in proportion to its size. There is a whole series of causes for this. First of all there is the difficulty of giving one’s own personality a certain status within the framework of metropolitan life. Where quantitative increase of value and energy has reached its limits, one seizes on qualitative distinctions, so that, through taking advantage of the existing sensitivity to differences, the attention of the social world can, in some way, be won for oneself. This leads ultimately to the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice, of fastidiousness, the meaning of which is no longer to be found in the content of such activity itself but rather in its being a form of “being different”—of making oneself noticeable. For many types of persons these are still the only means of saving for oneself, through the attention gained from others, some sort of self-esteem and the sense of filling a position. In the same sense there operates an apparently insignificant factor which in its effects however is perceptibly cumulative, namely, the brevity and rarity of meetings which are allotted to each individual as compared with social intercourse in a small city. For here we find the attempt to appear to-the-point, clear-cut and individual with extraordinarily greater frequency than where frequent and long association assures to each person an unambiguous conception of the other’s personality.

This appears to me to be the most profound cause of the fact that the metropolis places emphasis on striving for the most individual forms of personal existence—regardless of whether it is always correct or always successful. The development of modern culture is characterized by the predominance of what one can call the objective spirit over the subjective; that is, in language as well as in law, in the technique of production as well as in art, in science as well as in the objects of domestic environment, there is embodied a sort of spirit (Geist), the daily growth of which is followed only imperfectly and with an even greater lag by the intellectual development of the individual. If we survey for instance the vast culture which during the last century has been embodied in things and in knowledge, in institutions and comforts, and if we compare them with the cultural progress of the individual during the same period—at least in the upper classes—we would see a frightful difference in rate of growth between the two which represents, in many points, rather a regression of the culture of the individual with reference to spirituality, delicacy and idealism. This discrepancy is in essence the result of the success of the growing division of labor. For it is this which requires from the individual an ever more one-sided type of achievement which, at its highest point, often permits his personality as a whole to fall into neglect. In any case this overgrowth of objective culture has been less and less satisfactory for the individual. Perhaps less conscious than in practical activity and in the obscure complex of feelings which flow from him, he is reduced to a negligible quantity. He becomes a single cog as over against the vast overwhelming organization of things and forces which gradually take out of his hands everything connected with progress, spirituality and value. The operation of these forces results in the transformation of the latter from a subjective form into one of purely objective existence. It need only be pointed out that the metropolis is the proper
arena for this type of culture which has outgrown every personal element. Here in buildings and in educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technique, in the formations of social life and in the concrete institutions of the State is to be found such a tremendous richness of crystallizing, depersonalized cultural accomplishments that the personality can, so to speak, scarcely maintain itself in the face of it. From one angle life is made infinitely more easy in the sense that stimulations, interests, and the taking up of time and attention, present themselves from all sides and carry it in a stream which scarcely requires any individual efforts for its ongoing. But from another angle, life is composed more and more of these impersonal cultural elements and existing goods and values which seek to suppress peculiar personal interests and incomparabilities. As a result, in order that this most personal element be saved, extremities and peculiarities and individualizations must be produced and they must be over-exaggerated merely to be brought into the awareness even of the individual himself. The atrophy of individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture lies at the root of the bitter hatred which the preachers of the most extreme individualism, in the footsteps of Nietzsche, directed against the metropolis. But it is also the explanation of why indeed they are so passionately loved in the metropolis and indeed appear to its residents as the saviors of their unsatisfied yearnings.

When both of these forms of individualism which are nourished by the quantitative relationships of the metropolis, i.e., individual independence and the elaboration of personal peculiarities, are examined with reference to their historical position, the metropolis attains an entirely new value and meaning in the world history of the spirit. The eighteenth century found the individual in the grip of powerful bonds which had become meaningless—bonds of a political, agrarian, guild and religious nature—delimitations which imposed upon the human being at the same time an unnatural form and for a long time an unjust inequality. In this situation arose the cry for freedom and equality—the belief in the full freedom of movement of the individual in all his social and intellectual relationships which would then permit the same noble essence to emerge equally from all individuals as Nature had placed it in them and as it had been distorted by social life and historical development. Alongside of this liberalistic ideal there grew up in the nineteenth century from Goethe and the Romantics, on the one hand, and from the economic division of labor on the other, the further tendency, namely, that individuals who had been liberated from their historical bonds sought now to distinguish themselves from one another. No longer was it the “general human quality” in every individual but rather his qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability that now became the criteria of his value. In the conflict and shifting interpretations of these two ways of defining the position of the individual within the totality is to be found the external as well as the internal history of our time. It is the function of the metropolis to make a place for the conflict and for the attempts at unification of both of these in the sense that its own peculiar conditions have been revealed to us as the occasion and the stimulus for the development of both. Thereby they attain a quite unique place, fruitful with an inexhaustible richness of meaning in the development of the mental life. They reveal themselves as one of those great historical structures in which conflicting life-embracing currents find themselves with equal legitimacy. Because of this, however, regardless of whether we are sympathetic or antipathetic with their individual expressions, they transcend the sphere in which a judge-like attitude on our part is appropriate. To the extent that such forces have been integrated, with the fleeting existence of a single cell, into the root as well as the crown of the totality of historical life to which we belong—it is our task not to complain or to condone but only to understand.
THINKING ABOUT THE READING

According to Simmel, the individual is both liberated and repressed by the social forces of modern urban life. How does the objectivism of the urban environment lead individuals to feel alienation from or superficial relationships with those around them? How does it make the urban individual more calculative and rational in contrast with the sentimentality of the rural individual? On the other hand, how does the metropolis allow the urban individual more autonomy and flexibility to define themselves without the cultural pressures found in smaller communities?

Where have you lived in your lifetime—a small town or a large city? Perhaps both? Consider how the social forces of the space you live in affect your inner meaning and development of self. Have you developed a “blasé outlook” in the midst of the disorienting nature of large urban environments? Do you find more sentimentality and familiarity in your interactions within small town communities “where everyone knows your name”?

Conversely, can you give any examples of spaces within urban life that allow for the sentimentality and familiarity that Simmel associates with rural areas? What social forces might impede the social intercourse and personal relationships that Simmel suggests are indicative of rural life?
Reminders from my creditors pile up on my desk. Some bills are most urgent; still, there are things I must buy—my shoes are in tatters, I cannot work late without a desk lamp, and one needs to eat every day . . . What can I do?

I can go to my brother and ask him for a loan. I’ll explain my situation to him. Most probably, he’ll grumble a little, and preach to me about the virtue of foresight, prudence and planning, of not living above one’s means; but he’ll reach into his pocket in the end and count his money. If he finds some, he’ll give me what I need. Or at least a part he can afford.

Alternatively, I may go to my bank manager. But it would make no sense to explain to him how dreadfully I suffer. What does he care? The only question he’ll ask me is what guarantee I can offer that the loan will be repaid. He’d like to know whether I have a regular income large enough to afford the repayment of the loan together with the interest. So I’ll have to show him my salary slips; if I had a property, I’d have to offer it as collateral—a second mortgage, perhaps. If the manager is satisfied that I am not too excessive a risk and that the loan is likely to be duly repaid (with handsome interest, of course), he will lend me the money.

Depending on where I turn to solve my problem, I can expect two very different kinds of treatment. Two different sets of questions, referring obviously to two different conceptions of my right (my entitlement) to receive assistance. My brother is unlikely to inquire about my solvency; for him, the loan is not a matter of choice between good and bad business. What counts for him is that I am his brother; being his brother and being in need, I have sufficient claim to his help. My need is his obligation. The bank manager, on the other hand, could not care less who I am and whether I need the money I ask for. The one thing he would wish to know is whether the loan is likely to be a sensible, profitable business transaction for him or the bank he represents. In no way is he obliged, morally or otherwise, to lend me money. Were my brother to refuse my request, he would have to prove to me that he was unable to offer me the loan. With the bank manager, it would be the other way around: if I wanted him to offer me a loan, it is I who would have to prove to him that I am capable of prompt repayment of my debts.

Human interaction succumbs to the pressure of two principles which all too often contradict each other: the principle of equivalent exchange, and the principle of the gift. In the case of equivalent exchange, self-interest rules supreme. The other partner of the interaction may be recognized as an autonomous person, a legitimate subject of needs and rights—and yet those needs and rights are viewed first and foremost as constraints and obstacles to the full satisfaction of one’s own interests. One is guided above all by concern with “just” payment in exchange for the services one renders to the needs of the other. “How much will I be paid?” “What is in it for me?” “Could I be better off doing something else?” “Have I not been cheated?” These and similar questions are what one asks about the prospective action in order to evaluate its desirability and to establish the order of preference between alternative choices. One bargains about the meaning of equivalence. One deploys all the resources one can lay one’s hand on in order to obtain the best deal possible and tilt the transaction in one’s own favor. Not so in the case of a gift. Here, the
needs and the rights of others are the main—perhaps the only—motive for action. Rewards, even if they come in the end, are not a factor in the calculation of desirability of action. The concept of equivalence is altogether inapplicable. The goods are given away, the services are extended merely because the other person needs them and, being the person it is, has the right for the needs to be respected.

The two kinds of treatment which we discussed at the beginning of this article offer an example of the daily manifestations of the gift-exchange choice. As a first approximation, we may call my relationship with my brother (in which the gift motive prevailed) a personal one, and the relationship between myself and my bank manager (in which the exchange attitude came to the fore) impersonal. What happens in the framework of a personal relationship depends almost entirely on who we, the partners, are—and very little on what either of us has done, is doing or will do: on our quality, not performance. We are brothers, and hence we are obliged to assist each other in need. It does not matter (or, at least, it should not matter) whether the need in question arises from bad luck, miscalculation or improvidence. It matters even less whether the sum offered to bail me out is “secure”—that means, whether my performance is such that it warrants the hope of repayment. In an impersonal relationship, the opposite is true. It is only performance which counts, not the quality. It does not matter who I am, only what I am likely to do. My partner will be interested in my past record, as a basis on which to judge the likelihood of my future behavior.

Talcott Parsons, one of the most influential post-war sociologists, considered the opposition between quality and performance as one of the four major oppositions among which each conceivable pattern of human relationship must choose. He gave these oppositions the name of pattern variables. Another pair of opposite options to choose between is, according to Parsons, that of universalism and particularism. Pondering over my request, my brother might think of many things, yet universal principles, like legal regulations, codes of conduct or current interest rates were not, in all probability, among them. For him, I was not a “specimen of a category,” a case to which some universal rule may apply. I was a particular, unique case—his brother. Whatever he was going to do he would do because I was such a unique person, unlike any other, and hence the question “What would he do in other similar circumstances?” simply did not arise. It was again very different with the bank manager. For him, I was just one member of a large category of past, current and prospective borrowers. Having dealt with so many others “like me” before, the bank manager surely worked out universal rules to be applied for all similar cases in the future. The outcome of my particular application would depend therefore on whatever the universal rules say about the credibility of my case.

The next pattern variable also sets the two cases under consideration in opposition to each other. The relationship between me and my brother is diffuse; the relationship between me and the bank manager is specific. The generosity of my brother was not just a one-off whim; it was not an attitude improvised specifically for the distress I reported in this one conversation. His brotherly predisposition towards me spills over into everything which concerns me—everything is also a matter of his concern. There is nothing in the life of either of us which does not matter for the other. If my brother was inclined to be helpful in this particular case, it is because he is generally well disposed towards me and interested in everything I do and might have done. His understanding and care would not be confined to financial matters. Not so with the bank manager; his conduct was specifically geared to this application there and then; his reaction to my request and his final decision were based entirely on the facts of the case and bore no relation whatsoever to other aspects of my life or personality. Most things important to me he rightly saw as irrelevant as far as the application for the loan was concerned, and hence left them out of consideration.
The fourth opposition crowns, so to speak, the other three (though one could argue as well that it underlies them and, indeed, makes them possible). This is the opposition, in Parsons’ words, between affec
tivity and affer
tive neutrality. This means that some interac
tions are infused with emotions—compassion, sympathy or love. Some others are “cool,” detached, unemotional. Impersonal relations do not arouse in the actors any feelings other than a passionate urge to achieve a successful transaction. The actors themselves are not objects of emotions; they are neither liked nor disliked. If they strike a hard bargain, try to cheat, prevaricate or avoid commitments, some of the impatience with the unduly slow progress of the transaction may rub off on the attitude towards them; again, some affection may be born if they cooperate in the transaction with zeal and goodwill—when they are the sort of person “it is a pleasure to do busi
ness with.” By and large, however, emotions are not an indispensable part of impersonal interactions, while they are the very factors which make personal interaction plausible.

My brother and I both feel deeply about our relationship. In all probability, we like each other. It is more than probable, however, that we empathize with each other and have a fel
low-feeling for each other: we tend to put ourselves in each other’s position, to under
stand each other’s predicament, to imagine the joy or the agony of the other partner, feel good about the joy, and suffer because of the agony. This is hardly the case in my relationship with the bank manager. We meet too seldom and know each other too little to “read out” the partner’s feeling. Were we able to do so, we still wouldn’t do it—unless the feelings we wished to discover or anticipate in the partner bear a direct relationship to the success of the trans
action at hand (I’d try to avoid making the bank manager angry; instead, I’d wish to elicit his or her good humor through jokes or flat
tery, hoping to relax the defenses—counting on human weaknesses). Otherwise, feelings are neither here nor there. Moreover, they might be positively harmful if allowed to interfere with judgment; if, for instance, my bank man
ager decides to offer me the loan because of feeling pity and compassion for my misery, and for this reason disregards my financial recklessness, which may easily cause a loss to the bank he or she represents.

While emotion is an indispensable accom
paniment to personal relations, it would be out of place in impersonal ones. In the latter, dis
passion and cool calculation are the rules one may disregard only at one’s own peril. The unemotional stance taken by my partners in an impersonal transaction may well hurt my feel
ings, particularly when the situation which prompted me to turn to them in the first place has caused me pain and anguish. Unreasonably, I’ll then be inclined to blame the unemotional attitude, so jarringly at odds with my excite
ment, on the “heartlessness and insensitivity of the bureaucrats.” This is not an image which will assist the success of impersonal transac
tions. Hence we hear time and again of “listen
ing banks” and “banks who like to say yes”; banks consider it profitable to conceal the impersonality of their attitude towards clients (that is, their interest in clients’ money, not in their private problems and feelings) and therefore promise what they cannot and do not intend to deliver: to conduct impersonal trans
actions in a mood geared to personal ones.

Perhaps the most crucial distinction between personal and impersonal contexts of interaction lies in the factors on which the actors rely for the success of their action. We all depend on the actions of so many people of whom we know, if anything, very little; much too little to base our plans and our hopes on their personal characteristics, like reliability, trustworthiness, honesty, industry and so on. With so little knowledge at our disposal, a transaction would be downright impossible were it not for the opportunity to settle the issue in an impersonal manner: the chance to appeal not to the personal traits or aptitudes of the partners (which we do not know anyhow), but to the universal rules which apply to all cases of the same category, whoever happens to be our partner at the moment. Under
conditions of limited personal knowledge, appealing to rules is the only way to make communication possible. Imagine what an incredibly large, unwieldy volume of knowledge you would need to amass if all your transactions with others were based solely on your properly researched estimate of their personal qualities. The much more realistic alternative is to get hold of the few general rules that guide the interchange, and trust that the partner will do the same and observe the same rules.

Most things in life are indeed organized in such a way as to enable partners to interact without any or with little personal information about each other. It would be quite impossible for me, ignorant about medical science as I am, to assess the healing ability and dedication of the consultants to whom I turn for help; fortunately, however, their competence to deal with my ailment has been confirmed, testified and certified by the British Medical Association, which accepted them as members, and by the hospital management, which employed them. I can, therefore, limit myself to reporting the fact of my case and assume—trust—that in exchange I’ll receive the service which the case warrants and requires. When trying to make sure that the train I have boarded is scheduled to travel to the town I wish to reach, I may safely ask people dressed in the British Railroad uniform, without worrying about putting their love of truth to the test. I let into my house someone showing me a gas board inspector’s card without going through the checks and inquiries I’d normally apply to a complete stranger. In all these and similar cases some people, personally unknown to me (like those sitting on the board of the Medical Association or the gas board), took upon themselves the task of vouching for the competent, rule-conforming conduct of people whose credentials they endorse. By so doing, they have made it possible for me to accept the services of such people on trust.

And yet it is precisely because so many of our transactions are performed in an impersonal context that the need of personal relationships becomes so poignant and acute.

Our craving for “deep and wholesome” personal relationships grows in intensity the wider and less penetrable is the network of impersonal dependencies in which we are entangled. I am an employee in the company where I earn my salary, a customer in the many shops where I buy things I need or believe I need, a passenger on the bus or on the train which takes me to and from my place of work, a viewer in the theatre, a voter in the party which I support, a patient in the doctor’s surgery, and so many other things in so many other places. Everywhere I feel that only a small section of myself is present. I must constantly watch myself not to allow the rest of myself to interfere, as its other aspects are irrelevant and unwelcome in this particular context. And thus nowhere do I feel truly myself; nowhere am I fully at home. All in all, I begin to feel like a collection of the many different roles I play, each one among different people and in a different place. Is there something to connect them? Who am I in the end—the true, the real “I”?

As Georg Simmel observed a long time ago, in the densely populated, variegated world we inhabit the individuals tend to fall back upon themselves in the never-ending search for sense and unity. Once focused on ourselves rather than on the world outside, this overwhelming thirst for unity and coherence is articulated as the search for self-identity.

The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann presented the search for self-identity as the primary and the most powerful cause of our overwhelming need of love—of loving and being loved. Being loved means being treated by the other person as unique, as unlike any other; it means that the loving persons accept that the loved ones need not invoke universal rules in order to justify the images they hold of themselves or their demands; it means that the loving person accepts and confirms the sovereignty of myself, my right to decide for myself and to choose myself on my own authority; it means that he or she agrees with my emphatic and stubborn statement “Here is what I am, what I do, and where I stand.”
Being loved means, in other words, being understood—or at least “understood” in the sense in which we use it whenever we say, “I want you to understand me!” or ask with anguish, “Do you understand me? Do you really understand me?” This craving for being understood is a desperate call to someone to put himself or herself in my shoes, to see things from my point of view, to accept without further proof that I indeed have such a point of view, which ought to be respected for the simple reason that it is mine. What I am after when craving to be understood is a confirmation that my own, private experience—my inner motives, my image of ideal life, my image of myself, my misery or joy—are real. I want a validation of my self-portrayal. I find such a validation in my acceptance by another person; in the other person’s approval of what I would otherwise suspect of being just a figment of my imagination, my idiosyncrasy, the product of my fantasy running wild. I hope to achieve such a validation through my partner’s willingness to listen seriously and with sympathy when I am talking about myself; my partner, in Luhmann’s words, should “lower the threshold of relevance”: my partner ought to accept everything I say as relevant and worth listening to and thinking about.

As a matter of fact, there is a paradox in my wishes. On one hand, I want myself to be a unique whole, and not just a collection of the roles I play when “out there,” only to take them off the moment I move from one place (or one company) to another. Thus I want to be unlike anybody else, similar to no one but myself—not to be just one of the many cogs in someone else’s wheel. On the other hand, I know that nothing exists just because I have imagined it. I know the difference between fantasy and reality, and I know that whatever truly exists must surely exist for others as much as it does for me (remember the knowledge of everyday life each of us has and without which life in society is inconceivable; one of the crucial items of this knowledge is the belief that experiences are shared, that the world looks to others the same way as it looks to ourselves). And so the more I succeed in developing a truly unique self, in making my experience unique, the more I need a social confirmation of my experience. It seems, at least at first sight, that such a confirmation can only be had through love. The outcome of the paradox is that, in our complex society in which most human needs are attended to in an impersonal way, the need of a loving relationship is deeper than at any other time. This means also that the burden love must carry is formidable—and so are the pressures, tensions and obstacles the lovers must fight and conquer.

What makes a love relationship particularly vulnerable and fragile is the need for reciprocity. If I want to be loved, the partner I select will in all probability ask me to reciprocate—to respond with love. And this means, as we have already noticed, that I should return the services of my lover: act in such a way as to confirm the reality of my partner’s experience; to understand at the same time as I am seeking to be understood myself. Ideally, each partner will strive to find meaning in the other partner’s world. But the two realities (mine and my partner’s) are surely not identical; worse still, they have but a few, if any, common points. When two people meet for the first time, both have behind them a long life of their own which was not shared with the other. Two distinct biographies would in all probability have produced two fairly distinct sets of experiences and expectations. Now they must be renegotiated. At least in some respects the two sets are likely to be found mutually contradictory. It is improbable that I and my partner will be ready to admit right away that both sets, in their entirety, are equally real and acceptable and do not need corrections and compromises. One set, or even both, will have to give way, be trimmed or even surrendered for the sake of a lasting relationship. And yet such a surrender defies the very purpose of love and the very need love is expected to satisfy. If renegotiation indeed takes place, if both partners see it through, the rewards are great. But the road to the happy end is thorny, and much patience and looking forward is needed to travel it unscathed.
The American sociologist Richard Sennett coined the term, “destructive Gemeinschaft” for a relationship in which both partners obsessively pursue the right to intimacy, to open oneself up to the partner, to share with the partner the whole, most private truth about one’s inner life, to be absolutely sincere—that is, to hide nothing, however upsetting the information may be for the partner. In Sennett’s view, stripping one’s soul bare in front of the partner thrusts an enormous burden on the latter’s shoulders, as the partner is asked to give agreement to things which do not necessarily arouse enthusiasm, and to be equally sincere and honest in reply. Sennett does not believe that a lasting relationship, and particularly a lasting loving relationship, can be erected on the wobbly ground of mutual intimacy. The odds are overwhelming that the partners will make demands of each other which they cannot meet (or, rather, do not wish to meet, considering the price); they will suffer and feel tormented and frustrated—and more often than not they will decide to call it a day, stop trying and withdraw. One or other of the partners will choose to opt out, and to seek satisfaction of his or her need of self-confirmation elsewhere.

Once again we find out, therefore, that the fragility of the love relationship—the destructiveness of the communion sought by the partners in love—is caused first and foremost by the requirement of reciprocity. Paradoxically, my love would be sustainable and safe only if I did not expect it to be reciprocated. Strange as it may seem, the least vulnerable is love as a gift: I am prepared to accept my beloved’s world, to put myself in that world and try to comprehend it from inside—without expecting a similar service in exchange. . . . I need no negotiation, agreement or contract. Once aimed in both directions, however, intimacy makes negotiation and compromise inevitable. And it is precisely the negotiation and compromise which one or both partners may be too impatient, or too self-concerned, to bear lightly. With love being such a difficult and costly achievement, it is no wonder one finds demand for a substitute for love: for someone who would perform the function of love (that is, supply confirmation of inner experience, having first patiently absorbed a full, intimate confession) without demanding reciprocity in exchange. Herein lies the secret of the astounding success and popularity of psychoanalytic sessions, psychological counseling, marriage guidance, etc. For the right to open oneself up, make one’s innermost feelings known to another person, and in the end receive the longed-for approval of one’s identity, one need only pay money. Monetary payment transforms the analyst’s or the therapist’s relation to their patients or clients into an impersonal one. And so one can be loved without loving. One can be concerned with oneself, and have the concerns shared, without giving a single thought to the people whose services have been bought, and who have therefore taken upon themselves the obligation of sharing as a part of a business transaction.

Another, perhaps less vulnerable substitute for love (more precisely, for the function of identity-approval) is offered by the consumer market. The market puts on display a wide range of “identities” from which one can select one’s own. Commercial advertisements take pains to show the commodities they try to sell in their social context, that means as a part of a particular lifestyle, so that the prospective customer can consciously purchase symbols of such self-identity as he or she would wish to possess. The market also offers identity-making tools, which can be used differentially, to produce results which differ somewhat from each other and are in this way personalized. Through the market, one can put together various elements of the complete identikit of a DIY, customized self. One can learn how to express oneself as a modern, liberated, carefree woman; or as a thoughtful, reasonable, caring housewife; or as an aspiring, self-confident tycoon; or as an easy-going, likeable fellow; or as an outdoor, physically fit, macho man; or as a romantic, dreamy and love-hungry creature; or as any mixture of all these. The advantage of market-promoted identities is that they come complete with their social approval, and so the
agony of seeking confirmation is spared. Identikits and lifestyle symbols are introduced by people with authority, and supported by the information that very many people approve of them by using them or by “switching to them.” Social approval therefore does not need to be negotiated—it has been, so to speak, built into the marketed product from the start.

With such alternatives widely available and growing in popularity, the effort required by the drive to solve the self-identity problem through reciprocal love has an ever smaller chance of success. As we have seen before, negotiating approval is a tormenting experience for the partners in love. Success is not possible without long and dedicated effort. It needs self-sacrifice on both sides. The effort and the sacrifice would perhaps be made more frequently and with greater zeal if they were not for the availability of “easy” substitutes. With the substitutes being easy to obtain (the only sacrifice needed is to part with a quantity of money) and aggressively peddled by the sellers, there is, arguably, less motivation for a laborious, time-consuming and frequently frustrating effort. Resilience withers when confronted with alluringly “foolproof” and less demanding marketed alternatives. Often the first hurdle, the first setback in the developing and vulnerable love partnership would be enough for one or both partners to wish to slow down, or to leave the track altogether. Often the substitutes are first sought with the intention to “complement,” and hence to strengthen or resuscitate, the failing love relationship; sooner or later, however, the substitutes unload that relationship of its original function and drain off the energy which prompted the partners to seek its resurrection in the first place.

A love relationship is thus exposed to a twofold danger. It may collapse under the pressure of inner tensions. Or it may retreat before, or turn itself into, another type of relationship—one which bears many or all the marks of an impersonal relationship: that of exchange.

We have noted that the only thing which counted there was the passing of a particular object, or a service, from one side of the transaction to the other; an object was changing hands. The living persons involved in the transactions did not do much more than play the role of carriers or mediators; they prompted and facilitated the circulation of goods. Only apparently was their gaze fixed on their respective partners. In fact, they assigned relevance solely to the object of exchange, while granting the other persons a secondary, derivative importance—as holders or gatekeepers of the goods they wanted. They saw “through” their partners, straight into the goods themselves. The last thing the partners would consider would be the tender feelings or spiritual cravings of their counterparts (that is, unless the mood of the partner should influence the successful completion of the exchange). To put it bluntly, both partners acted selfishly, the supreme motive of their action was to give away as little as possible and to get as much as possible; both pursued their own self-interest, concentrating their thought solely on the task at hand. Their aims were, therefore, at cross purposes. We may say that in transactions of impersonal exchange, the interests of the actors are in conflict.

Nothing in an exchange transaction is done simply for the sake of the other; nothing about the partner is important unless it may be used to secure a better bargain in the transaction. The actors are therefore naturally suspicious of each other’s motives. They fear being cheated. They feel they need to remain wide awake, wary and vigilant. They cannot afford to look the other way, lose their attention for a single moment. They want protection against the selfishness of the other side; they would not, of course, expect the other side to act selflessly, but they insist on a fair deal—that is, on whatever they consider to be an equivalent exchange. Hence the exchange relationships call for a binding rule, a law, and an authority entrusted with the task of adjudicating the fairness of the transaction and capable of imposing its decision by force in the case of
transgression. Various consumer associations, consumer watchdogs, ombudsmen, etc. are established out of this urge for protection. They take upon themselves the difficult task of monitoring the fairness of exchange. They also press the authorities for laws which would restrain the freedom of the stronger side to exploit the ignorance or naivety of the weaker one.

Seldom are the two counterparts of a transaction in a truly equal position: those who produce or sell the goods know much more of the quality of their product than the buyers and users are ever likely to learn. They may well push the product to gullible customers under false pretences, unless constrained by a law like the Trade Descriptions Act. The more complex and technically sophisticated the goods, the less their buyers are able to judge their true quality and value. To avoid being deceived, the prospective buyers have to resort to the help of independent, that is, disinterested, authorities; they would press for a law which clearly states their rights and allows them to make up for their relatively inferior position by taking their case to court.

It is, however, precisely because the partners enter exchange relationships only as functions of exchange, as conveyers of the goods, and consequently remain “invisible” to each other, that they feel much less overwhelmed and tied down than in the case of love relationships. They are much less involved. They do not take upon themselves cumbersome duties, or obligations other than the promise to abide by the terms of the transaction. Aspects of their selves which are not relevant to the transaction at hand are unaffected and retain their autonomy. All in all, they feel that their freedom has not been compromised, and their future choices will not be constrained by the bond they enter. Exchange is relatively “inconsequential” as it is confined to a transaction entered into and finished here and now and restricted in time and space. Neither does it involve the whole of one’s personality.

Love and exchange are two extremes of a continuous line along which all human relations may be plotted. In the form we have described them here they seldom appear in your or my experience. We have discussed them in a pure form, as models. Most relationships are “impure,” and mix the two models in varying proportions. Most love relationships contain elements of business-like bargaining for the fair rate of exchange in the “I’ll do this if you do that” style. Except for a chance encounter or one-off transaction, the actors in exchange relationships seldom remain indifferent to each other for long, and sooner or later more is involved than just money and goods. Each extreme model, however, retains its relative identity even if submerged in a mixed relationship. Each carries its own set of expectations, its own image of the perfect state of affairs—and hence orients the conduct of the actors in its own specific direction. Much of the ambiguity of the relationships we enter with other people can be accounted for by reference to the tensions and contradictions between the two extreme, complementary yet incompatible, sets of expectations. The model-like, pure relationships seldom appear in life, where the ambivalence of human relationships is the rule.

Our dreams and cravings seem to be torn between two needs it well might be impossible to gratify at the same time, yet equally difficult to satisfy when pursued separately. These are the needs of belonging and of individuality. The first need prompts us to seek strong and secure ties with others. We express this need whenever we speak or think of togetherness or of community. The second need sways us towards privacy, a state in which we are immune to pressures and free from demands, do whatever we think is worth doing, “are ourselves.” Both needs are pressing and powerful; the pressure of each grows the less the given need is satisfied. On the other hand, the nearer one need comes to its satisfaction, the more painfully we feel the neglect of the other. We find out that community without privacy feels more like oppression than belonging. And that privacy without community feels more like loneliness than “being oneself.”
THINKING ABOUT THE READING

According to Bauman, what is the gift-exchange choice that underlies human relationships? How does he apply these principles to love relationships? Do you see this gift-exchange choice manifested in your social interactions? How do some of Talcott Parsons’s pattern variables factor into the principles of equivalent exchange and the gift?
Why are so many fears in the air, and so many of them unfounded? Why, as crime rates plunged throughout the 1990s, did two-thirds of Americans believe they were soaring? How did it come about that by mid-decade 62 percent of us described ourselves as “truly desperate” about crime—almost twice as many as in the late 1980s, when crime rates were higher? Why, on a survey in 1997, when the crime rate had already fallen for a half dozen consecutive years, did more than half of us disagree with the statement “This country is finally beginning to make some progress in solving the crime problem”!

In the late 1990s the number of drug users had decreased by half compared to a decade earlier; almost two-thirds of high school seniors had never used any illegal drugs, even marijuana. So why did a majority of adults rank drug abuse as the greatest danger to America’s youth? Why did nine out of ten believe the drug problem is out of control, and only one in six believe the country was making progress?

Give us a happy ending and we write a new disaster story. In the late 1990s the unemployment rate was below 5 percent for the first time in a quarter century. People who had been pounding the pavement for years could finally get work. Yet pundits warned of imminent economic disaster. They predicted inflation would take off, just as they had a few years earlier—also erroneously—when the unemployment rate dipped below 6 percent.

We compound our worries beyond all reason. Life expectancy in the United States has doubled during the twentieth century. We are better able to cure and control diseases than any other civilization in history. Yet we hear that phenomenal numbers of us are dreadfully ill. In 1996 Bob Garfield, a magazine writer, reviewed articles about serious diseases published over the course of a year in the Washington Post, the New York Times, and USA Today. He learned that, in addition to 59 million Americans with heart disease, 53 million with migraines, 25 million with osteoporosis, 16 million with obesity, and 3 million with cancer, many Americans suffer from more obscure ailments such as temporomandibular joint disorders (10 million) and brain injuries (2 million). Adding up the estimates, Garfield determined that 543 million Americans are seriously sick—a shocking number in a nation of 266 million inhabitants. “Either as a society we are doomed, or someone is seriously double-dipping,” he suggested.

Garfield appears to have underestimated one category of patients: for psychiatric ailments his figure was 53 million. Yet when Jim Windolf, an editor of the New York Observer, collated estimates for maladies ranging from borderline personality disorder (10 million) and sex addiction (11 million) to less well-known conditions such as restless leg syndrome (12 million) he came up with a figure of 152 million. “But give the experts a little time,” he advised. “With another new quantifiable disorder or two, everybody in the country will be officially nuts.”

Indeed, Windolf omitted from his estimates new-fashioned afflictions that have yet to make it into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association: ailments such as road rage, which afflicts more than half of Americans, according to a psychologist’s testimony before a congressional hearing in 1997. The scope of our health fears seems limitless. Besides worrying disproportionately about legitimate ailments and prematurely about would-be
diseases, we continue to fret over already refuted dangers. Some still worry, for instance, about "flesh-eating bacteria," a bug first rammed into our consciousness in 1994 when the U.S. news media picked up on a screamer headline in a British tabloid, “Killer Bug Ate My Face.” The bacteria, depicted as more brutal than anything seen in modern times, was said to be spreading faster than the pack of photographers outside the home of its latest victim. In point of fact, however, we were not “terribly vulnerable” to these “superbugs,” nor were they “medicine’s worst nightmares,” as voices in the media warned.

Group A strep, a cyclical strain that has been around for ages, had been dormant for half a century or more before making a comeback. The British pseudoepidemic had resulted in a total of about a dozen deaths in the previous year. Medical experts roundly rebutted the scares by noting that of 20 to 30 million strep infections each year in the United States fewer than 1 in 1,000 involve serious strep A complications, and only 500 to 1,500 people suffer the flesh-eating syndrome, whose proper name is necrotizing fasciitis. Still the fear persisted. Years after the initial scare, horrifying news stories continued to appear, complete with grotesque pictures of victims. A United Press International story in 1998 typical of the genre told of a child in Texas who died of the “deadly strain” of bacteria that the reporter warned “can spread at a rate of up to one inch per hour.”

Killer Kids

When we are not worrying about deadly diseases we worry about homicidal strangers. Every few months for the past several years it seems we discover a new category of people to fear: government thugs in Waco, sadistic cops on Los Angeles freeways and in Brooklyn police stations, mass-murdering youths in small towns all over the country. A single anomalous event can provide us with multiple groups of people to fear. After the 1995 explosion at the federal building in Oklahoma City, first we panicked about Arabs. “Knowing that the car bomb indicates Middle Eastern terrorists at work, it’s safe to assume that their goal is to promote free-floating fear and a measure of anarchy, thereby disrupting American life,” a New York Post editorial asserted. “Whatever we are doing to destroy Mideast terrorism, the chief terrorist threat against Americans, has not been working,” wrote A. M. Rosenthal in the New York Times. When it turned out that the bombers were young white guys from middle America, two more groups instantly became spooky: right-wing radio talk show hosts who criticize the government—depicted by President Bill Clinton as “pursuers of hatred and division”—and members of militias. No group of disgruntled men was too ragtag not to warrant big, prophetic news stories.

We have managed to convince ourselves that just about every young American male is a potential mass murderer—a remarkable achievement, considering the steep downward trend in youth crime throughout the 1990s. Faced year after year with comforting statistics, we either ignore them—adult Americans estimate that people under eighteen commit about half of all violent crimes when the actual number is 13 percent—or recast them as “The Lull Before the Storm” (Newsweek headline). “We know we’ve got about six years to turn this juvenile crime thing around or our country is going to be living with chaos,” Bill Clinton asserted in 1997, even while acknowledging that the youth violent crime rate had fallen 9.2 percent the previous year.

The more things improve the more pessimistic we become. Violence-related deaths at the nation’s schools dropped to a record low during the 1996–97 academic year (19 deaths out of 54 million children), and only one in ten public schools reported any serious crime. Yet Time and U.S. News & World Report both ran headlines in 1996 referring to “Teenage Time Bombs.” In a nation of “Children Without Souls” (another Time headline that year), “America’s beleaguered cities are about to be victimized by a paradigm shattering wave of ultraviolent, morally vacuous young people some call ‘the superpredators,’” William Bennett, the former Secretary of Education, and John
DiIulio, a criminologist, forecast in a book published in 1996.11 Instead of the arrival of superpredators, violence by urban youths continued to decline. So we went looking elsewhere for proof that heinous behavior by young people was “becoming increasingly more commonplace in America” (CNN). After a sixteen-year-old in Pearl, Mississippi, and a fourteen-year-old in West Paducah, Kentucky, went on shooting sprees in late 1997, killing five of their classmates and wounding twelve others, these isolated incidents were taken as evidence of “an epidemic of seemingly depraved adolescent murderers” (Geraldo Rivera). Three months later in March 1998 all sense of proportion vanished after two boys ages eleven and thirteen killed four students and a teacher in Jonesboro, Arkansas. No longer, we learned in Time, was it “unusual for kids to get back at the world with live ammunition.” When a child psychologist on NBC’s “Today” show advised parents to reassure their children that shootings at schools are rare, reporter Ann Curry corrected him. “But this is the fourth case since October,” she said.12

Over the next couple of months young people failed to accommodate the trend hawks. None committed mass murder. Fear of killer kids remained very much in the air nonetheless. In stories on topics such as school safety and childhood trauma, reporters recaptured the gory details of the killings. And the news media made a point of reporting every incident in which a child was caught at school with a gun or making a death threat. In May, when a fifteen-year-old in Springfield, Oregon, did open fire in a cafeteria filled with students, killing two and wounding twenty-three others, the event felt like a continuation of a “disturbing trend” (New York Times). The day after the shooting, on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered,” the criminologist Vincent Schiraldi tried to explain that the recent string of incidents did not constitute a trend, that youth homicide rates had declined by 30 percent in recent years, and more than three times as many people were killed by lightning than by violence at schools. But the show’s host, Robert Siegel, interrupted him. “You’re saying these are just anomalous events?” he asked, audibly peeved. The criminologist reiterated that anomalous is precisely the right word to describe the events, and he called it “a grave mistake” to imagine otherwise.

Yet given what had happened in Mississippi, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Oregon, could anyone doubt that today’s youths are “more likely to pull a gun than make a fist,” as Katie Couric declared on the “Today” show?13 Roosevelt Was Wrong

We had better learn to doubt our inflated fears before they destroy us. Valid fears have their place; they cue us to danger. False and overdrawn fears only cause hardship.

Even concerns about real dangers, when blown out of proportion, do demonstrable harm. Take the fear of cancer. Many Americans overestimate the prevalence of the disease, underestimate the odds of surviving it, and put themselves at greater risk as a result. Women in their forties believe they have a 1 in 10 chance of dying from breast cancer, a Dartmouth study found. Their real lifetime odds are more like 1 in 250. Women’s heightened perception of risk, rather than motivating them to get checkups or seek treatment, can have the opposite effect. A study of daughters of women with breast cancer found an inverse correlation between fear and prevention: the greater a daughter’s fear of the disease the less frequent her breast self-examination. Studies of the general population—both men and women—find that large numbers of people who believe they have symptoms of cancer delay going to a doctor, often for several months. When asked why, they report they are terrified about the pain and financial ruin cancer can cause as well as poor prospects for a cure. The irony of course is that early treatment can prevent precisely those horrors they most fear.14

Still more ironic, if harder to measure, are the adverse consequences of public panics. Exaggerated perceptions of the risks of cancer
at least produce beneficial by-products, such as bountiful funding for research and treatment of this leading cause of death. When it comes to large-scale panics, however, it is difficult to see how potential victims benefit from the frenzy. Did panics a few years ago over sexual assaults on children by preschool teachers and priests leave children better off? Or did they prompt teachers and clergy to maintain excessive distance from children in their care, as social scientists and journalists who have studied the panics suggest? How well can care givers do their jobs when regulatory agencies, teachers’ unions, and archdioceses explicitly prohibit them from any physical contact with children, even kindhearted hugs?15

Was it a good thing for children and parents that male day care providers left the profession for fear of being falsely accused of sex crimes? In an article in the *Journal of American Culture*, sociologist Mary DeYoung has argued that day care was “refeminized” as a result of the panics. “Once again, and in the time-honored and very familiar tradition of the family, the primary responsibility for the care and socialization of young children was placed on the shoulders of low-paid women,” she contends.16

We all pay one of the costs of panics: huge sums of money go to waste. Hysteria over the ritual abuse of children cost billions of dollars in police investigations, trials, and imprisonments. Men and women went to jail for years “on the basis of some of the most fantastic claims ever presented to an American jury,” as Dorothy Rabinowitz of the *Wall Street Journal* demonstrated in a series of investigative articles for which she became a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 1996. Across the nation expensive surveillance programs were implemented to protect children from fiends who reside primarily in the imaginations of adults.17

The price tag for our panic about overall crime has grown so monumental that even law-and-order zealots find it hard to defend. The criminal justice system costs Americans close to $100 billion a year, most of which goes to police and prisons. In California we spend more on jails than on higher education. Yet increases in the number of police and prison cells do not correlate consistently with reductions in the number of serious crimes committed. Criminologists who study reductions in homicide rates, for instance, find little difference between cities that substantially expand their police forces and prison capacity and others that do not.18

The turnabout in domestic public spending over the past quarter century, from child welfare and antipoverty programs to incarceration, did not even produce reductions in fear of crime. Increasing the number of cops and jails arguably has the opposite effect: it suggests that the crime problem is all the more out of control.19

Panic-driven public spending generates over the long term a pathology akin to one found in drug addicts. The more money and attention we fritter away on our compulsions, the less we have available for our real needs, which consequently grow larger. While fortunes are being spent to protect children from dangers that few ever encounter, approximately 11 million children lack health insurance, 12 million are malnourished, and rates of illiteracy are increasing.20

I do not contend, as did President Roosevelt in 1933, that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” My point is that we often fear the wrong things. In the 1990s middle-income and poorer Americans should have worried about unemployment insurance, which covered a smaller share of workers than twenty years earlier. Many of us have had friends or family out of work during economic downturns or as a result of corporate restructuring. Living in a nation with one of the largest income gaps of any industrialized country, where the bottom 40 percent of the population is worse off financially than their counterparts two decades earlier, we might also have worried about income inequality. Or poverty. During the mid- and late 1990s 5 million elderly Americans had no food in their homes, more than 20 million people used emergency food programs each year, and one in five children lived in poverty—more than a quarter
million of them homeless. All told, a larger proportion of Americans were poor than three decades earlier.21

One of the paradoxes of a culture of fear is that serious problems remain widely ignored even though they give rise to precisely the dangers that the populace most abhors. Poverty, for example, correlates strongly with child abuse, crime, and drug abuse. Income inequality is also associated with adverse outcomes for society as a whole. The larger the gap between rich and poor in a society, the higher its overall death rates from heart disease, cancer, and murder. Some social scientists argue that extreme inequality also threatens political stability in a nation such as the United States, where we think of ourselves not as “haves and have nots” but as “haves and will haves.” “Unlike the citizens of most other nations, Americans have always been united less by a shared past than by the shared dreams of a better future. If we lose that common future,” the Brandeis University economist Robert Reich has suggested, “we lose the glue that holds our nation together.”22 . . .

Two Easy Explanations

In the following discussion I will try to answer two questions: Why are Americans so fearful lately, and why are our fears so often misplaced? To both questions the same two-word answer is commonly given . . . [One] popular explanation blames the news media. We have so many fears, many of them off-base, the argument goes, because the media bombard us with sensationalistic stories designed to increase ratings. This explanation, sometimes called the media-effects theory . . . contains sizable kernels of truth. When researchers from Emory University computed the levels of coverage of various health dangers in popular magazines and newspapers they discovered an inverse relationship: much less space was devoted to several of the major causes of death than to some uncommon causes. The leading cause of death, heart disease, received approximately the same amount of coverage as the eleventh-ranked cause of death, homicide. They found a similar inverse relationship in coverage of risk factors associated with serious illness and death. The lowest-ranking risk factor, drug use, received nearly as much attention as the second-ranked risk factor, diet and exercise.23

Disproportionate coverage in the news media plainly has effects on readers and viewers. When Esther Madriz, a professor at Hunter College, interviewed women in New York City about their fears of crime, they frequently responded with the phrase “I saw it in the news.” The interviewees identified the news media as both the source of their fears and the reason they believed those fears were valid. Asked in a national poll why they believe the country has a serious crime problem, 76 percent of people cited stories they had seen in the media. Only 22 percent cited personal experience.24

When professors Robert Blendon and John Young of Harvard analyzed forty-seven surveys about drug abuse conducted between 1978 and 1997, they too discovered that the news media, rather than personal experience, provide Americans with their predominant fears. Eight out of ten adults say that drug abuse has never caused problems in their family, and the vast majority report relatively little direct experience with problems related to drug abuse. Widespread concern about drug problems emanates, Blendon and Young determined, from scares in the news media, television in particular.25

Television news programs survive on scares. On local newscasts, where producers live by the dictum “if it bleeds, it leads,” drug, crime, and disaster stories make up most of the news portion of the broadcasts. Evening newscasts on the major networks are somewhat less bloody, but between 1990 and 1998, when the nation’s murder rate declined by 20 percent, the number of murder stories on network newscasts increased 600 percent (not counting stories about O.J. Simpson).26

After the dinnertime newscasts the networks broadcast newsmagazines, whose guiding principle seems to be that no danger is too small
to magnify into a national nightmare. Some of the risks reported by such programs would be merely laughable were they not hyped with so much fanfare: “Don’t miss Dateline tonight or YOU could be the next victim!” Competing for ratings with drama programs and movies during prime-time evening hours, newsmagazines feature story lines that would make a writer for “Homicide” or “ER” wince.27

“It can happen in a flash. Fire breaks out on the operating table. The patient is surrounded by flames,” Barbara Walters exclaimed on ABC’s “20/20” in 1998. The problem—oxygen from a face mask ignited by a surgical instrument—occurs “more often than you might think,” she cautioned in her introduction, even though reporter Arnold Diaz would note later, during the actual report, that out of 27 million surgeries each year the situation arises only about a hundred times. No matter, Diaz effectively nullified the reassuring numbers as soon as they left his mouth. To those who “may say it’s too small a risk to worry about” he presented distraught victims: a woman with permanent scars on her face and a man whose son had died.28

The gambit is common. Producers of TV newsmagazines routinely let emotional accounts trump objective information. In 1994 medical authorities attempted to cut short the brouhaha over flesh-eating bacteria by publicizing the fact that an American is fifty-five times more likely to be struck by lightning than die of the suddenly celebrated microbe. Yet TV journalists brushed this fact aside with remarks like, “whatever the statistics, it’s devastating to the victims” (Catherine Crier on “20/20”), accompanied by stomach-turning videos of disfigured patients.29

Sheryl Stolberg, then a medical writer for the Los Angeles Times, put her finger on what makes the TV newsmagazines so cavalier: “Killer germs are perfect for prime time,” she wrote. “They are invisible, uncontrollable, and, in the case of Group A strep, can invade the body in an unnervingly simple manner, through a cut or scrape.” Whereas print journalists only described in words the actions of “billions of bacteria” spreading “like underground fires” throughout a person’s body, TV newsmagazines made use of special effects to depict graphically how these “merciless killers” do their damage.30

**In Praise of Journalists**

Any analysis of the culture of fear that ignored the news media would be patently incomplete, and of the several institutions most culpable for creating and sustaining scares the news media are arguably first among equals. They are also the most promising candidates for positive change. Yet by the same token critiques such as Stolberg’s presage a crucial shortcoming in arguments that blame the media. Reporters not only spread fears, they also debunk them and criticize one another for spooking the public. A wide array of groups, including businesses, advocacy organizations, religious sects, and political parties, promote and profit from scares. News organizations are distinguished from other fear-mongering groups because they sometimes bite the scare that feeds them.

A group that raises money for research into a particular disease is not likely to negate concerns about that disease. A company that sells alarm systems is not about to call attention to the fact that crime is down. News organizations, on the other hand, periodically allay the very fears they arouse to lure audiences. Some newspapers that ran stories about child murderers, rather than treat every incident as evidence of a shocking trend, affirmed the opposite. After the schoolyard shooting in Kentucky the New York Times ran a sidebar alongside its feature story with the headline “Despite Recent Carnage, School Violence Is Not on Rise.” Following the Jonesboro killings they ran a similar piece, this time on a recently released study showing the rarity of violent crimes in schools.31

Several major newspapers parted from the pack in other ways. USA Today and the Washington Post, for instance, made sure their readers knew that what should worry them is
the availability of guns. USA Today ran news stories explaining that easy access to guns in homes accounted for increases in the number of juvenile arrests for homicide in rural areas during the 1990s. While other news outlets were respectfully quoting the mother of the thirteen-year-old Jonesboro shooter, who said she did not regret having encouraged her son to learn to fire a gun (“it’s like anything else, there’s some people that can drink a beer and not become an alcoholic”), USA Today ran an op-ed piece proposing legal parameters for gun ownership akin to those for the use of alcohol and motor vehicles. And the paper published its own editorial in support of laws that require gun owners to lock their guns or keep them in locked containers. Adopted at that time by only fifteen states, the laws had reduced the number of deaths among children in those states by 23 percent.

The Washington Post, meanwhile, published an excellent investigative piece by reporter Sharon Walsh showing that guns increasingly were being marketed to teenagers and children. Quoting advertisements and statistics from gun manufacturers and the National Rifle Association, Walsh revealed that by 1998 the primary market for guns—white males—had been saturated and an effort to market to women had failed. Having come to see children as its future, the gun industry has taken to running ads like the one Walsh found in a Smith & Wesson catalog: “Seems like only yesterday that your father brought you here for the first time,” reads the copy beside a photo of a child aiming a handgun, his father by his side. “Those sure were the good times—just you, dad and his Smith & Wesson.”

As a social scientist I am impressed and somewhat embarrassed to find that journalists, more often than media scholars, identify the jugglery involved in making small hazards appear huge and huge hazards disappear from sight. Take, for example, the scare several years ago over the Ebola virus. Another Washington Post reporter, John Schwartz, identified a key bit of hocus-pocus used to sell that scare. Schwartz called it “the Cuisinart Effect,” because it involves the mashing together of images and story lines from fiction and reality. A report by Dateline NBC on death in Zaire, for instance, interspersed clips from Outbreak, a movie whose plot involves a lethal virus that threatens to kill the entire U.S. population. Alternating between Dustin Hoffman’s character exclaiming, “We can’t stop it!” and real-life science writer Laurie Garrett, author of The Coming Plague, proclaiming that “HIV is not an aberration . . . it’s part of a trend,” Dateline’s report gave the impression that swarms of epidemics were on their way.

Another great journalist-debunker, Malcolm Gladwell, noted that the book that had inspired Outbreak, Richard Preston’s The Hot Zone, itself was written “in self-conscious imitation of a sci-fi thriller.” In the real-world incident that occasioned The Hot Zone, monkeys infected in Zaire with a strain of Ebola virus were quarantined at a government facility in Reston, Virginia. The strain turned out not to be lethal in humans, but neither Preston in his book nor the screenwriters for Outbreak nor TV producers who sampled from the movie let that anticlimax interfere with the scare value of their stories. Preston speculates about an airborne strain of Ebola being carried by travelers from African airports to European, Asian, and American cities. In Outbreak hundreds of people die from such an airborne strain before a cure is miraculously discovered in the nick of time to save humanity. In truth, Gladwell points out in a piece in The New Republic, an Ebola strain that is both virulent to humans and airborne is unlikely to emerge and would mutate rapidly if it did, becoming far less potent before it had a chance to infect large numbers of people on a single continent, much less throughout the globe. “It is one of the ironies of the analysis of alarmists such as Preston that they are all too willing to point out the limitations of human beings, but they neglect to point out the limitations of microscopic life forms,” Gladwell notes.

Such disproofs of disease scares appear rather frequently in general-interest magazines and newspapers, including in publications
where one might not expect to find them. The Wall Street Journal, for instance, while primarily a business publication and itself a retailer of fears about governmental regulators, labor unions, and other corporate-preferred hobgoblins, has done much to demolish medical myths. Among my personal favorites is an article published in 1996 titled “Fright by the Numbers,” in which reporter Cynthia Crossen rebuts a cover story in Time magazine on prostate cancer. One in five men will get the disease, Time thundered. “That’s scary. But it’s also a lifetime risk—the accumulated risk over some 80 years of life,” Crossen responds. A forty-year-old’s chance of coming down with (not dying of) prostate cancer in the next ten years is 1 in 1,000, she goes on to report. His odds rise to 1 in 100 over twenty years. Even by the time he’s seventy, he has only a 1 in 20 chance of any kind of cancer, including prostate.36

In the same article Crossen counters other alarmist claims as well, such as the much-repeated pronouncement that one in three Americans is obese. The number actually refers to how many are overweight, a less serious condition. Fewer are obese (a term that is less than objective itself), variously defined as 20 to 40 percent above ideal body weight as determined by current standards.37

Morality and Marketing

To blame the media is to oversimplify the complex role that journalists play as both proponents and doubters of popular fears. Why do news organizations and their audiences find themselves drawn to one hazard rather than another?

Mary Douglas, the eminent anthropologist who devoted much of her career to studying how people interpret risk, pointed out that every society has an almost infinite quantity of potential dangers from which to choose. Societies differ both in the types of dangers they select and the number. Dangers get selected for special emphasis, Douglas showed, either because they offend the basic moral principles of the society or because they enable criticism of disliked groups and institutions. In Risk and Culture, a book she wrote with Aaron Wildavsky, the authors give an example from fourteenth-century Europe. Impure water had been a health danger long before that time, but only after it became convenient to accuse Jews of poisoning the wells did people become preoccupied with it.

Or take a more recent institutional example. In the first half of the 1990s U.S. cities spent at least $10 billion to purge asbestos from public schools, even though removing asbestos from buildings posed a greater health hazard than leaving it in place. At a time when about one-third of the nation’s schools were in need of extensive repairs the money might have been spent to renovate dilapidated buildings. But hazards posed by seeping asbestos are morally repugnant. A product that was supposed to protect children from fires might be giving them cancer. By directing our worries and dollars at asbestos we express outrage at technology and industry run afoul.38

From a psychological point of view extreme fear and outrage are often projections. Consider, for example, the panic over violence against children. By failing to provide adequate education, nutrition, housing, parenting, medical services, and child care over the past couple of decades we have done the nation’s children immense harm. Yet we project our guilt onto a cavalcade of bogeypeople—pedophile preschool teachers, preteen mass murderers, and homicidal au pairs, to name only a few.39

When Debbie Nathan, a journalist, and Michael Snedeker, an attorney, researched the evidence behind publicized reports in the 1980s and early 1990s of children being ritually raped and tortured they learned that although seven out of ten Americans believed that satanic cults were committing these atrocities, few of the incidents had actually occurred. At the outset of each ritual-abuse case the children involved claimed they had not been molested. They later changed their tunes at the urging of parents and law enforcement authorities. The ghastly tales of abuse, it turns out, typically came from the
parents themselves, usually the mothers, who had convinced themselves they were true. Nathan and Snedeker suggest that some of the mothers had been abused themselves and projected those horrors, which they had trouble facing directly, onto their children. Other mothers, who had not been victimized in those ways, used the figure of ritually abused children as a medium of protest against male dominance more generally. Allegations of children being raped allowed conventional wives and mothers to speak out against men and masculinity without having to fear they would seem unfeminine. “The larger culture,” Nathan and Snedeker note, “still required that women’s complaints about inequality and sexual violence be communicated through the innocent, mortified voice of the child.”

Diverse groups used the ritual-abuse scares to diverse ends. Well-known feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Catharine MacKinnon took up the cause, depicting ritually abused children as living proof of the ravages of patriarchy and the need for fundamental social reform.

This was far from the only time feminist spokeswomen have mongered fears about sinister breeds of men who exist in nowhere near the high numbers they allege. Another example occurred a few years ago when teen pregnancy was much in the news. Feminists helped popularize the frightful but erroneous statistic that two out of three teen mothers had been seduced and abandoned by adult men. The true figure is more like one in ten, but some feminists continued to cultivate the scare well after the bogus stat had been definitively debunked.

Final Thoughts

The short answer to why Americans harbor so many misbegotten fears is that immense power and money await those who tap into our moral insecurities and supply us with symbolic substitutes.

(1) Statements of alarm by newscasters; [and] (2) glorification of wannabe experts are two telltale tricks of the fear mongers’ trade. [Other tactics include] (3) the use of poignant anecdotes in place of scientific evidence; (4) the christening of isolated incidents as trends; and (5) depletions of entire categories of people as innately dangerous.

If journalists would curtail such practices, there would be fewer anxious and misinformed Americans. Ultimately, though, neither the ploys that narrators use nor what Cantril termed “the sheer dramatic excellence” of their presentations fully accounts for why people in 1938 swallowed a tall tale about martians taking over New Jersey or why people today buy into tales about perverts taking over cyberspace, unionizing employees taking over workplaces, heroin dealers taking over middle-class suburbs, and so forth.

Fear mongers have knocked the optimism out of us by stuffing us full of negative presumptions about our fellow citizens and social institutions. But the United States is a wealthy nation. We have the resources to feed, house, educate, insure, and disarm our communities if we resolve to do so.

There should be no mystery about where much of the money and labor can be found—in the culture of fear itself. We waste tens of billions of dollars and person-hours every year on largely mythical hazards like road rage, on prison cells occupied by people who pose little or no danger to others, on programs designed to protect young people from dangers that few of them ever face, on compensation for victims of metaphorical illnesses, and on technology to make airline travel—which is already safer than other means of transportation—safer still.

We can choose to redirect some of those funds to combat serious dangers that threaten large numbers of people. At election time we can choose candidates that proffer programs rather than scares.

Or we can go on believing in martian invaders.

Notes

1. Crime data here and throughout are from reports of the Bureau of Justice Statistics unless otherwise noted. Fear of crime: Esther Madriz, Nothing

2. Eva Bertram, Morris Blachman et al., Drug War Politics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 10; Mike Males, Scapegoat Generation (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1996), ch. 6; Karen Peterson, “Survey: Teen Drug Use Declines,” USA Today, 19 June 1998, p. A6; Robert Blendon and John Young, “The Public and the War on Illicit Drugs,” Journal of the American Medical Association 279 (18 March 1998): 827–32. In presenting these statistics and others I am aware of a seeming paradox: I criticize the abuse of statistics by fearmongering politicians, journalists, and others but hand down precise-sounding numbers myself. Yet to eschew all estimates because some are used inappropriately or do not withstand scrutiny would be as foolhardy as ignoring all medical advice because some doctors are quacks. Readers can be assured I have interrogated the statistics presented here as factual. As notes throughout the book make clear, I have tried to rely on research that appears in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. Where this was not possible or sufficient, I traced numbers back to their sources, investigated the research methodology utilized to produce them, or conducted searches of the popular and scientific literature for critical commentaries and conflicting findings.


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about guns appear in Jonathan Alter, “Harnessing
the Hysteria,” Newsweek, 6 April 1998, p. 27.
23. Karen Frost, Erica Frank et al., “Relative
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24. Madriz, Nothing Bad Happens to Good
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25. Blendon and Young, “War on Illicit Drugs,”
See also Ted Chiricos et al., “Crime, News and Fear of
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38–41; Barbara Bliss Osborn, “If It Bleeds, It Leads,”
Extra, September–October 1994, p. 15; Jenkins,
Pedophiles and Priests, pp. 68–71; “It’s Murder,” USA
Today, 20 April 1998, p. D2; Lawrence Grossman,
“Does Local TV News Need a National Nanny?”
27. Regarding fearmongering by newsmagazines,
see also Elizabeth Jensen et al., “Consumer
Alert,” Brill’s Content (October 1998): 130–47.
29. Thomas Maugh, “Killer Bacteria a Rarity,”
Los Angeles Times, 3 December 1994, p. A29; Ed
Siegel, “Roll Over, Ed Murrow,” Boston Globe, 21
30. Sheryl Stolberg, “‘Killer Bug’ Perfect for
Prime Time,” Los Angeles Times, 15 June 1994,
and Michael Lemonic and Leon Jaroff, “The Killers
31. Lewin, “More Victims and Less Sense”;
Tamar Lewin, “Study Finds No Big Rise in Public-
32. “Licensing Can Protect,” USA Today, 7
Surprises When It Comes to Violence,” USA Today,
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Today, 26 March 1998, p. A11; Karen Peterson and
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about guns appear in Jonathan Alter, “Harnessing
the Hysteria,” Newsweek, 6 April 1998, p. 27.
34. John Schwartz, “An Outbreak of Medical
35. Richard Preston, The Hot Zone (New York:
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Journal, 11 April 1996, pp. B1, 8. See also G. Pascal
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37. On variable definitions of obesity see also
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38. Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, Risk
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and Blame (London: Routledge, 1992). See also
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39. See Marina Warner, “Peroxide Mug-shot,”
40. Nathan and Snedeker, Satan’s Silence (quote
from p. 240). See also David Bromley, “Satanism: The
New Cult Scare,” in James Richardson et al., eds., The
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41. Of girls ages fifteen to seventeen who gave
birth, fewer than one in ten were unmarried and had
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See Steven Holmes, “It’s Awful, It’s Terrible, It’s . . .
42. CNN, “Crossfire,” 27 August 1995 (con-
tains Huffington quote); Ruth Conniff, “Warning:

THINKING ABOUT THE READING

Glassner originally wrote this piece over a decade ago. What are some contemporary examples of cultural fears that he might include if he were writing this today? How do you determine if the fear is a cultural myth or something that should be taken seriously as a social problem? According to Glassner, how are these cultural myths created, and why are we so inclined to believe in them? Do you think a culture less organized by the medium of television would be more or less likely to support such myths?