“The Bystander: On the Politics of Disengagement”

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Editor

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This year's Faculty Seminar Ebook explored the topic "The Bystander: On the Politics of Disengagement." When Seminar members started the discussion in September, 2007, we were prepared to ask why observing humanity, faced with evidence of assault, could be so callous as to remain mere onlookers. Why the indifference?

But as we proceeded with our investigations we began to see more objectively the multiple reasons for standing by or, more accurately, for non-intervention. Among the reasons we considered were:

Are witnesses implicated in a crisis if they fail to react in the public arena? Is there any obligation for bystanders to intervene? Is significant intervention the prerogative of the state and other organized institutions?

Why does the reality of merely standing by persist in the information age? What are the inner and external restraints on intervention? What circumstances promote the transition to active and often bold intervention?

Do the media and NGOs paradoxically abet indifference, providing an excuse for everyone else to stand by? Do bystanders abound because and not in spite of media exposure?

Is bystander behavior necessarily equivalent to apathy? Isn’t it sometimes prudent or at least better than the alternative, which can complicate a crisis? Did missionaries in Sudan, urging settlement rather than migration, threaten rather than assure tribal survival?

Seen strictly in isolation, standing by appears to indicate apathy; it seems to constitute behavior generally denounced. But a bystander in one situation might well be someone active and involved in others. If decisions are driven by choices, an appraisal of bystander behavior should be reconsidered in larger life contexts.
Apathy is not a personal choice – rather, structural conditions create a “pseudo-world” of passive consumers. A “spectacular” culture that makes a fetish of spectacles and abstract images creates a “world apart”, detaching people from reality.

Inaction might well be a result of regnant values and policies rather than a symptom of callous indifference. Assumptions held by UK leaders during the 19th century Irish famine gave rise to free-trade policies and the belief that cultural “regeneration” rested on initiative and not on government bail-outs. These prejudices inhibited the UK’s intervention in the protracted Irish crisis.

The papers that follow explore more completely many of these conclusions. As an Ebook, we will accept other papers addressing this topic on an ongoing basis. In the meantime, use this web site to read papers by Kean University students and faculty on topics the Faculty Seminar explored in previous years: Empire and Cultural Conquest, Representations of Genocide, and Forgiveness: Political Considerations. We would welcome your contributions to these Ebooks as well.
Introduction

The Faculty Seminar on Comparative Cultures has been a great source of intellectual debate and insight across disciplines. These efforts are expanded into a culture of intellectual rigor and creativity by making an alliance of sorts between faculty and students that culminate in today’s event: the Faculty and Student Roundtable. Before we begin our program, let’s trace back a little bit of the trajectory of the program and its accomplishments. Under the direction of Dr. Dennis Klein the Faculty Seminar has produced four compilations of essays under the faculty seminar’s theme for each year such as:

Empire and Cultural Conquest I
Empire and Cultural Conquest II
Representations of Genocide, and
Forgiveness: Political Considerations

During our discussions at the Faculty Seminar throughout this last year, we explored the notion of the bystander or someone disengaged towards those matters that require action, specifically action that affects collectivities of people. Many times we examined the example of Darfur, one of the most shocking events in contemporary societies that has required our attention and action. But sadly enough, that is not the only example of current global problems that affect us all in some smaller or larger measure. How could we even entertain the possibility of extreme suffering in our world? And more importantly, what can we do about it? I will not be able to exhaust all the discussions triggered by our topic last year but will point at some general issues.

Our journey took us to examine the classical case of the woman in Queens – the Genovese case, who was murdered while witnesses did not help. One explanation is that people do not care, another one is that each person thought that the next was going to do something. This raises the issue of collective responsibility. Is it the responsibility of the state to attend to human crisis, ngo’s or ourselves as individuals? There are many different levels in which our implication might be expected or required, at all those
different levels there are some common denominators: a recognition of an unjust situation and the responsibility to act at some level within a myriad of constant demands. Within the intricacies of the global world we currently inhabit, prompted by globalization where there is almost an instant broadcasting of extreme situations around the world, being connected also begets social responsibility.

The society of the produced bystander

According to Guy Debord late capitalist societies are societies of the spectacle and the spectacle he refers to is the spectacle of consumption whereby producers and consumers, actors and spectators are generated. This might be an extreme binary and a determinist approach bordering on a meta-narrative with broad generalizations. But still a relevant perspective from which Debord provides a broader perspective from which to locate the phenomenon of the bystander as a society that produces passive observators. He argues that we live in a society where social relations take the form of representations/images/replicas of replicas as the circuits through which information circulates, for our consumption. According to Debord, capital has reached such a level of accumulation that it becomes an image, turning images into the contemporary currency of our times based on the creation of pseudo needs to increase consumption. Individuals, according to Debord, do not experience events, but all action is instead conducted through the represented image.

We become passive observers socialized into ways of seeing by the tv --and ways of consuming, I should add. The tendency is to act uncritically towards what we are exposed to including social, political, and collective injustices that require our action. From the society of the spectacle perspective one could claim that the phenomenon of the bystander is produced by late capitalism. And for Debord the only way to upset this circuit of disengagement is to assume a critical stance of dialogue. This forum – the faculty and student roundtable -- might contribute towards those ends.

The Overwhelmed Bystander

Another way of looking at the politics of disengagement is to approach this theme from a slightly different perspective. Younger generations have different ways of being engaged that might not correspond to traditional ones or the ones that are more generally accepted.
Highly educated, computer savvy, and blasé in their expectation from politicians could be part of what some might consider lack of interest or active participation from younger generations in social and political issues.

Yet from a philosophical perspective that considers Kant, Badiou, Lacan, Freud, Levinas, Marx, and a series of exemplary thinkers, Critchley’s book: *Infinitely demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* provides a thorough understanding via a lengthy trajectory into what might be considered the ethical project of our contemporary times. We do not have enough time here to discuss his ambitious project but we can consider a couple of his intriguing remarks. According to Critchley we should overcome a nihilist stance – such as a breakdown in order of meaning, indifference, meaninglessness, directionless and despair -- by adopting a philosophical activity. This philosophical activity -- understood as a way of thinking that is practical, what Marx called praxis – is a free movement of thought and critical reflection. As Critchley states, a militant resistance to nihilism (which according to Nietzsche is the will to nothingness) is necessary. To be resolute, autharchy, to have self-legislation and self-origination are some of the values that counter a nihilistic stance, and where the values of self-mastery, happiness and/or freedom are highly regarded. But most importantly than the values themselves will be the recognition of values, in general, as the guiding principles of our actions. Inaction, in other words, could be understood as a lack of commitment to specific values.

Accordingly, the individual as Critchley understands her, is constantly divided between itself and the demand of others he cannot meet. A demand that demands approval. This in Critchley’s view is a challenge. We will always be confronted with the demands of others and it is our own ethics that determine the outcome of our actions, our reaction to others demands. In Critchley’s terms this reaction represents that which we are committed to. Are we then overwhelmed with demands? And how do we “manage” these myriad of demands others place on us as well as the ones we place on ourselves based of our ethical values?

**The Morally Wrong Bystander**

From another philosophical perspective we also discussed how apathy -- not being involved -- can be outwit by moral courage. Our discussion took the turn to acknowledge that to be morally courageous changes according to specific situations and circumstances,
moral courage is situated. Some of the general aspects that need to be present to assume a morally courageous stance are: honesty, responsibility, respect, fairness and compassion. These values could be debated and even argued against because of the universalist tendency they imply, one that has been highly questioned in postmodern politics. But they are also constitutive of a formal condition that expresses the most basic aspects of a moral guide of sorts.

The dilemmas confronted in our decision to act and how to do so begins with the acknowledgement that there is inexhaustible suffering. This suffering begs for our involvement. Critical reflection for a society of spectacle, ethics of commitment against an empty nihilism, and moral courage to acknowledge inexhaustible suffering are at least three of the most important lessons we learned throughout our faculty seminar discussions. In the papers will also explore many different facets of the dilemmas confronted ion contemporary times regarding the notion of the bystander or the engagement in matters of social justice.


Perspectives of Action and Inaction in History:  
A Study in Traditional, Gender, Quantitative History, and Historical Sociology

David Ziznewski

(Paper written for “Senior Seminar in History,”  
a course taught in 2007 by Dr. Dennis B. Klein)

In what is most certainly considered our recent past, the 1970s-1980s, there have been many developments in the study of history and the way in which material is interpreted (Burke 6-7). With these new developments come new schemata to the way in which those who would traditionally be considered the bystander in history—the common people as opposed to the political, military, and religious leaders—are viewed. These developments have created a rift between what is known as traditional, scientific, empirical, or Rankean history, and the ‘new’ histories, which include many different historiographies such as military, Marxist, intellectual, postmodernist, etc., etc. This rift that has developed has led some to believe that there is a crisis in the study of history in an epistemological sense. Those who purport the validity of both sides certainly have their fair share of arguments for and against and visa versa, however, the purpose of this paper is not to try and make a case one side or the other. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate some of the differences, and in some respect some of the similarities, between the two sides—and in the case of the new histories, between the different school’s of historical thought therein—to give us a greater understanding of the ways in which the study of history can be more complete through synthesis and evolution. The main focus in this comparative study will focus on the ideas of action and inaction, in the historical sense, and the idea of historical responsibility. However, before we move on, it is important to have a brief background on the general differences between traditional and new history.

In the first chapter of his book, New Perspective on Historical Writing, Peter Burke notes the general differences between traditional and new histories. First, Burke
points out that traditional history “is essentially concerned with politics” while “new history, on the other hand, has come to be concerned with virtually every human activity” (3). Secondly, while traditional history is interested in telling the story of a historical episode, the new histories seek to analyze the organizations of the events and the actions that surround them (4). Third, and possibly most important to our purposes here, traditional history tends to view actions from the top down, “concentrat[ing] on the great deeds of great men, statesmen, generals, and occasionally churchmen” while the new histories tend to focus from the ground up and on everyday people in conjunction with grand events in history or social change (4). The fourth way in which these two sides differ is in the way that they view source material. Traditional historians focus on official records while as new historians view such information relatively suspect since they “generally express the official point of view” and try to balance this information with that of other, non-official, sources (4-5). The final point of interest for our purposes here lay in the idea, as Burke put it, that the traditional “historian’s task is to give readers ‘the facts’ or, as Ranke put it in a much-quoted phrase, to tell ‘how it actually happened’” while new historians believe this degree of objectivity is impracticable since an historian will be writing “from a particular point of view” (5, 6). However, one note about this final point is that whether a traditional or new history, one common thread that we shall see through all of the examples is the idea of the search for ‘what really happened’—it is just that traditional historians believe that they are telling it as it happened.

In the pages to follow I will be illustrating, as best I can, these differences along with the aforementioned focus on agency and historical responsibility in the arenas of tradition history, gender history, quantitative history, and historical sociology. To begin there seems to be no better place than viewing the traditional paradigm of historical thought and inquiry. One of the fundamental components of traditional history is the idea of agency, the idea that a “great man” guides the actions of history through his actions
and will. Ralph Waldo Emerson may have summed this idea up best in his essay “Self-Reliance” when he said that:

[T]he fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works, that a true man belongs to no other time of place, but is the centre of things…Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his design;—and posterity seem to follow his steps as a train of clients…all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons. (3)

In this lyrical description by Emerson we see the belief that it is those men of power and stature who move the events of history; or, to some up in much simpler terms as delivered once more by Emerson: “The world is nothing; the man is all” (The American Scholar 1).

There may possibly be no greater illustration for this idea of agency, in the traditional sense, than from Leopold von Ranke—who many consider to be the father of traditional history, hence the name ‘Rankean’ history—in his work “The Great Powers.” In “The Great Powers,” Ranke chronicles the life of Frederick II who, as Ranke describes, took the reigns of the Prussian nation-state when Prussia was on the brink of extinction and led Prussia out of its maelstrom, rolled back the French, guaranteed the existence of a German state governed by German people, allowed culture, art, and literature to flourish, and allowed all of Europe to thrive through his defeat of the French. This might all seem to be a bit of a mouthful so let us break this down a bit. First, Ranke takes us to the doorstep of Seven Years War and exclaims that, “If ever an event depended upon a great personality, it was the Seven Years War”—of course referring to Frederick II (84). Furthermore, Ranke goes on to add when everything seemed to be falling apart for the Prussians Frederick persevered not because of the “the bravery of his troops, the loyalty of his subjects, and accidental circumstances. The main thing is that he kept up his spirit” (84).
With the defeat of the French, Frederick had elevated Prussia to the standing of a “great power,” as defined by Ranke himself, and in doing so allowed Prussian culture to flourish:

But I shall pause here since I wish to discuss politics, although all these things [the development of the fine arts and sciences] are very closely connected and a true political philosophy can only be inspired by a great national existence. This much is certain, that no other phenomenon contributed so much to the self-confidence with which this wave of enthusiasm was accompanied as did the life of Frederick II. A nation must feel independent in order to develop freely, and never has a literature flourished save when a climax of history prepared way for it. (88).

Additionally, Ranke goes on to assert that through Frederick’s defeat of the French, he blocked France from creating hegemony in the region which aloud other nations to assert themselves and thus allowed all of there own cultures to flourish for “[o]ut of separation and independent development will emerge the true harmony” (101).

Here we can plainly see the idea of agency. Ranke places the honor, or responsibility, of Prussia’s rise solely on the shoulders of Frederick II. There is no mention of Frederick’s advisors who certainly helped guide him, or at least gave advice, on pressing matters of state. The military victories do not belong to the generals or soldiers, there is no mention of the number of men that either side had fighting for them, and there is certainly no mention of the terrain on which the battles were fought and who held the strategic ground; the victory belongs only to Frederick. Not only this but all of Europe owes Frederick II a great deal of gratitude for allowing their cultures to flourish as Ranke describes; a clearer picture of a man who ‘is the centre of things’ I cannot even imagine.

The idea of agency, though, is not always singular even in traditional history. A perfect example of this can be found in Lucy S. Dawidowicz’s book *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945*. In this book the idea of agency is clear for all those who read it. As Dawidowicz makes clear, she assigns the idea of agency and historical responsibility to the entire German nation. Throughout her introduction, “The Subject: Definitions and
Contours,” and her chapter entitled “Death and Life in the East European Ghettos,” Dawidowicz consistently refers to the ‘German state,’ the ‘German dictatorship,’ the ‘German system of terror,’ and the “omnipresent Germans and their all-seeing eyes” (xvii). Moreover, Dawidowicz explicitly states that “[h]ere the Germans are the actors” (xv). In Dawidowicz’s mind it is clear who perpetrated ‘the war against the Jews’ and she makes this clear to her readers by following other constructs of the traditional paradigm. She uses the official German and Jewish documents as well as describes the event chronologically paying as close attention to detail as possible to give the reader a true sense of the events that have taken place; and in her own words, “As best I could I have tried to present what actually happened.” (xviii).

Near the end of Dawidowicz’s introduction, she breaks from the traditional approach slightly by saying:

This is not a value-free book. The very subject matter of the Final Solution precludes neutrality. In writing about a nation that transgressed the commandment “Thou shalt not murder,” it is impossible to be what Charles Beard characterized as “a neutral mirror.” (xviii)

In the traditional viewpoint all history is supposed to be recorded objectively. Dawidowicz, in this particular instance, gives credence to the new historian’s idea that all history is subjective. The fact that, in Dawidowicz’s mind, that the Germans systematically tried to exterminate a race of people should have no bearing on the way in which the history of WWII or the Holocaust is recorded in the history books if the traditional paradigm is to be accepted at face value. However, I digress, for this is not an issue to be taken up at this juncture.

Moving away from traditional history, I would like to contrast Dawidowicz’s work on the Holocaust with that of a historical sociologist point of view in Richard L. Rubenstein’s “Mass Death and Contemporary Civilization.” However, before we move

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2 Emphasis added.
3 Emphasis added.
into the realm of historical sociology, it is important to discuss some of the original foundations of this type of work in the *Annales* school of historical thought. For sociology is a field that searches for patterns to develop over periods of time, and without the foundations laid by those who worked on the *Annales* this type of work may have never been addressed.

The beginnings of the *Annales* can be traced to the late 1920s-early 1930s work of French professors Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre who “rejected the near-monopoly of French history by political and diplomatic topics” and focused their attention on “break[ing] down the boundaries between the human sciences, with historians incorporating as many of these disciplines as possible in their work” (Green 87). Our interest, however, lays in the ideas of Fernand Braudel and “his schema of time in a metaphor of the ocean” (88). Braudel believed that historical time had three separate layers that all interconnected with each other in various ways. It should suffice it to say that these were the long, medium, and short *durées*—which can be described as the interaction between man and nature taking place over hundreds of years, the cycles of economics, population, social and class orientation, power, and price over the course of the years, and the regional and geopolitical here and now respectively (88-89). Arguing that the longer, and thus stronger, undercurrents of civilization tend to continue on no matter what the day’s political sphere might do, Braudel “largely overturned the traditional emphasis on the importance of events and people as the agents of history” (90).

The idea of the interaction of these *durées* can be seen in Braudel’s work “The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II.” In this seminal work Braudel purports that the mountains were the key determining factor in the way of life of the peoples who resided there. Contrasting the lives of the mountain people by those of the plains, Braudel notes that “the mountains resist the march of history” due to their inaccessibility
Great powers of the plains were never wholly successful at subjugating the people of the mountains and, therefore, they led a much freer and egalitarian lifestyle. This, of course, is not to say that there was no interaction between the mountain and plains people. To the contrary interests of commerce, leisure, seasonal work, and displaced populations brought many down from the mountains and the interaction with those in the plains led influence being exerted on the people from the mountains. However, the plains peoples’ view of the mountaineers was generally rather negative due to their perceived uncouth nature, to which Braudel says, “In this way a social and cultural barrier is raised to replace the imperfect geographical barrier which is always being broken in a variety of ways” (108).

With this is mind, it is time that we turn our attention back to the Holocaust; though this time around we shall view the events from a different historical perspective, from that of a historical sociologist. As previously mentioned we are going to be dealing with the work of Richard L. Rubenstein, who does not think that the Germans were the agents of history at this point. To the contrary, Rubenstein believes that in order to understand the more toward the extermination of an entire group of people, one must place a Malthusian veil across Europe over the course of WWI and WWII to see that the wars of attrition that were fought on both sides were possibly the result of a subconscious desire of European leaders to deal with their excess populations. Furthermore, if one sees this blatant disregard for the lives of ones own countrymen, then, it is not hard to see the leap towards the extermination of a people who no country desired. To make this argument Rubenstein explains that “[f]or three centuries the peoples of Europe had exported their surplus populations to North and South America” (10). This was no longer plausible and as Rubenstein said, “Something changed in the twentieth century” (5). He was right something did change, and that something was that “the secularized culture
which substituted calculating rationality for the older traditional norms in personal and
group relations did not mature fully until the twentieth century” (6).

This ‘calculating rationality’ that Rubenstein speaks of was, to him, the idea that
the individual really did not matter. Human life came and went cheaply and to this he
draws a parallel to the “unprecedented magnitude of violence in the twentieth century” (7). On this note, Rubenstein notes the staggering sacrifices in soldiers that generals in
WWI were willing to make to gain even an inch on the battlefield (7-9). In response to
this unprecedented behavior Rubenstein asks, “Could it have been that both the Allies
and the Central Powers were in the grip of historical forces that were acting behind them
without their conscious knowledge” (10-11)? On top of this, Rubenstein purpose that
“[t]he Nazi elite clearly understood that the Jews were truly a surplus people whom
nobody wanted and whom they could dispose of as they pleased” (18). In support of this
argument, Rubenstein recalls the story of a British High Commissioner by the name of
Lord Moyne:

When informed by Joel Brand, a Hungarian Jewish emissary, that there
was a possibility of saving one million Hungarian Jews from
extermination at Auschwitz through Adolf Eichmann’s infamous “blood
for trucks” deal, Lord Moyne replied, “What shall I do with those million
Jews? Where shall I put them?” Lord Moyne and his government
understood that Hitler’s “final solution” was the most convenient way of
solving the problem of disposing of one group of surplus people for
themselves as well as for the Germans. The British government was by no
means averse to the “final solution” as long as the Germans did most of
the dirty work. (17)

This, along with other evidence and arguments, is used to show that agency in the case of
the Holocaust may not be so simple as Dawidowicz makes it out to be in placing the
responsibility on the Germans alone.

Staying in close proximity to the issues raised in the both Dawidowicz’s and
Rubenstein’s work, we find ourselves moving eastward to view the some of the
population politics of the Russians. In “Racial Politics without the concept of Race:

4 Emphasis added.
Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges,” Eric D. Weitz challenges the traditional view that “the Soviets created nations at least as much as they destroyed them” as part of their nationalist communist policies and did not exhibit the same racial or ethnic determinism as did the Nazis (9). To the contrary, Weitz makes the case that the evidence presented by the same historians who made the aforementioned claims show the idea that the Soviets had a “racial logic at work” when defining certain groups of people (18). In support of this argument Weitz shows that:

For a definite period of time and in relation to particular populations, Soviet policies rested on the notion that ontology determined politics, that if one were born a Korean, a Crimean Tatar, a Chechen, or, finally, a Jew one had to think and act in a particular manner. There was no escaping the charge that one was at least a security risk, if not an outright enemy of the people, if one were a Tatar or German, Korean or Chechen, or a host of others. (13)

By viewing these examples, along with many others, Weitz asserts that “the Soviet drive to remake the very composition of its citizenry, to remove targeted population groups from the social body, to cast certain nations as pariahs for eternity and to drive them into exile, does invite legitimate comparisons with Nazi policies” (24). However, being the historical sociologist that he is, Weitz makes clear the differences in historical patterns “between states that commit genocide and genocidal regimes” (28). Furthermore, the differences between the two are what separate the Third Reich and Khmer Rouge from the Stalinist Soviets among many others (including the United States) in our history who have perpetrated such acts.

In viewing of the structural analysis of historical sociology, it is easy for some of the structural points to be glossed over. To make sure that we do not miss this incredibly important characteristic of historical sociology it is helpful to look at Theda Skocpol’s work, “France, Russia, China: A Structural Analysis of Social Revolutions.” In this work Skocpol focuses on disproving the idea that social revolutions are “just extreme forms of individual or collective behavior” and that “[t]hey are distinctive conjunctures of
socio-historical structures and processes” that need to be understood “as complex wholes” (123). Viewing the revolutions and governmental collapses of 1789 France, 1917 Russia, and 1911-49 China, Skocpol observes that these regimes all exhibited the same characteristics in the face of early modernization. The similarities between all of the agrarian bureaucracies involved all shared the components of “(1) the collapse or incapacitation of central administrative and military machineries; (2) widespread peasant rebellions; and (3) marginal elite political movements” (124). If all of these conditions were not in place, a successful revolution could not occur.

An example of this can be found in Skocpol’s analyzation of the attempted revolution in Russia on 1905 as compared to that of 1917. The reason for the success of the 1917 revolution as opposed to the 1905 is that in 1905 Russia had plenty of resources available to them to quell the revolution. In contrast, by the time 1917 had rolled around, Russia was involved in the global conflict that was WWI and “was too inextricably entangled with foreign powers, friend and foe, economically and militarily more powerful than she” (130). This allowed for the revolution to get a full head of steam and put too much pressure of the Russian government for it to hold. And again we see the pattern of historical responsibility in contrast to that of the traditional vein that would have attributed these revolutions to either weak national leaders or strong revolutionary leaders.

Moving away from the way in which historical sociology is used to deconstruct and find patterns in the way the world works on a global scale, we find the essence of history from below, or the history of the masses, in the work of Bela Feldman-Bianco and Donna Huse and their study of Portuguese immigrants from the 1960s through the 1980s. In their study, entitled “The Construction of Immigrant Identity,” Feldman-Bianco and Huse provide a case study of fifteen women who emigrated from the Azores to try and discover the ways in which immigrants’ construct their identities, upon arrival in the
United States. This study, however, is not specifically designed to find out just what Portuguese immigrants felt upon their arrival and subsequent years in the United States. Feldman-Bianco and Huse’s work speaks to the general condition of the majority of immigrants who would have come from primarily poor, rural areas in which their lifestyle was defined by an agrarian living who arrive in the industrial centers of the northeaster United States.

From their research Feldman-Bianco and Huse discover that a longing exists immediately in almost every case for the life they imagined they had back home:

From the intercrossing of these multiple memories on their experiences of immigration and confrontation with industrial America, there emerged a shared memory which brings to the fore the human dimension of a time of non-industrial labor. More than a romanticization of the past of a mere fragmented operation of remembering, this collective memory is directly related to their struggles in the United States. As they recalled their first and hard times in the depressed industrial towns of south-eastern Massachusetts, they tended to remember, in lyric and sensorial fashion, only those beneficial aspects of the homeland they would like to see restored. (124)

The general characteristics of almost all of the immigrants—save those who either rose quickly and fell fast in social and economic standing—upon arrival, and indeed throughout their lives demonstrated a similar pattern of assimilation: at first a rough transitional period accompanied by longing for the homeland, second, a period assimilation that involves the blending of both cultures, and finally, a feeling of satisfaction with their place in the world and their life.

In Feldman-Bianco and Huse’s work there is the obvious quality that only women were interviewed in the study. Some might consider this a leaning toward gender history and not historical sociology. Now, I cannot speak to the reasons behind Feldman-Bianco and Huse only dealing with women in their study, however, I can certainly say that this is not any clear-cut example of gender history. This is because the overarching theme of the work has to do with construction of immigrant identity, not women’s construction of immigrant identity; the constructs described in the study most certainly cross all gender
lines and most social and racial as well. More importantly the organizing principle of the study is not based in gender, but rather in the process of assimilation for those who move from an agrarian background into an industrial setting. For a clear illustration of the idea of gender as an organizing principle of assimilation we turn to the work of Paula E. Hyman in “Paradoxes of Assimilation.” However, before we take this comparative leap it would unquestionably beneficial for us to get a bit of a background on the idea of gender history itself.

Gender history, or sometimes called women’s history, focuses on the concept that gender is a defining characteristic and contributes in forms of historical progression. Furthermore, this is believed to be a neglected field of study until very recent history due to the primary focus on men as the agents of history. We, however, should not view gender history as simply the history of women. To the contrary, gender history focuses on both men and women and the social constructs of gender in which they interact. For in the words of Joan W. Scott, “When historians look for ways in which the concept of gender legitimizes and constructs social relationships, they develop insight into the reciprocal nature of gender and society and into the particular and contextually specific ways in which politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics” (148). For an illustration of the ways in which political actions are framed in the context of gender, we look to Scott’s “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” and he analysis of gender constructs in relationships of power:

The subject of war, diplomacy, and high politics frequently comes up when traditional political historians question the utility of gender in their work. But here, too, we need to look beyond the actors and the literal import of their words. Power relations among nations and the status of colonial subjects have been made comprehensible (and thus legitimate) in terms of relations between male and female. The legitimizing of war—of expending young lives to protect the state—has variously taken the forms of explicit appeals to manhood (to the need to defend otherwise vulnerable women and children), of implicit reliance on belief in the duty of the sons to serve their national leaders or their (father the) king, and of associations between masculinity and national strength. (151).
Another “[o]ne of the tasks of women’s history is to call into question accepted schemes of periodization” and force us to look deeper at accepted ideas that the march of history is always moving toward progress (Kelly-Gadol 158). In this vein, the idea that the Renaissance was a benefit to us all is challenged in “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” by Joan Kelly-Gadol. In this piece, Kelly-Gadol challenges the idea that women benefited from the Renaissance as did men, and, instead, argues that women lost a significant amount of freedom, autonomy, political power, and standing in the transition from the medieval period to the Renaissance. The case is made for this idea through the analyzation of both medieval and Renaissance treatment of women through the regulation of female sexuality as opposed to men’s, their economic and political status, cultural roles, and the perceived ideal of women. Kelly-Gadol found in her work that the larger developments of the dawning of a new age in the sociopolitical structure placed a greater necessity on guarding hereditary rights and thus a greater need for the controlling of women and their actions. In conclusion, Kelly-Gadol notes that “[a]ll of the advances of Renaissance Italy, its protocapitalist economy, its states, and its humanistic culture, worked to mold the noblewoman into an aesthetic object: decorous, chaste, and doubly dependent—on her husband as well as the prince” making her far less independent than she was just a few short years before (178). Now that we have, or at least should have, a firm grip upon the basic organizing principles of gender history it is time that we returned to the idea of assimilation.

Paula E. Hyman’s work, “Paradoxes of Assimilation,” Hyman shows us that the general beliefs that rapid assimilation of Jews in the period of emancipation “caus[ed] a traumatic break with [their] past” is misguided since it only focused its attention on “the public behavior and pronouncements of a select group of urban Jewish men” (240). This, along with the experiences of women during the same period of time and focus on the nuclear family as a social organizing unit “mandate a rethinking of the nature and
significance of assimilation in the first generations of emancipation and into the contemporary period\(^5\) (240). Through her work, Hyman demonstrates that women’s traditional role outside the public sphere shielded them, for the most part, from the rapid pace of assimilation and transformed them into the keepers of the faith:

Jewish women assimilated along with their male kin, but they did so in different frameworks. The examination of women’s experiences reveals how gender shapes the process of assimilation... Jewish women’s gender limited their assimilation by confining them, like other middle-class women, to the domestic scene and thereby restricting their opportunities for education and participation in the public realm of economy and civic life. Unlike their brothers and husbands, middle-class Jewish women in Western societies confronted neither the workplace nor, until the twentieth century, the university. Because their social life occurred within their domestic context and the religiously segmented philanthropic associations...they initially had fewer contacts with non-Jews and experienced fewer external challenges to their childhood culture than did Jewish men.\(^6\) (243)

Once more we should realize that while this particular example of the ideas of gender in assimilation focuses specifically on Jewish women, this is not the only group that these ideas can relate to. As is mentioned in the previous quotation, these Jewish women were ‘like other middle-class women’ of the period and the affect that gender roles with have in the process of assimilation for any group of women during this period should likely operate along the same lines. One may also notice that this piece runs along a similar course to those of historical sociology—especially Feldman-Bianco and Huse’s, “The Construction of Immigrant Identity”. This is most certainly true; however, what one must understand when dealing with all of these new historiographies is that no one school of thought operates completely independent of all other schools (a point that will be discussed in greater detail later). A blending and borrowing of styles will always be present. Even within the new histories we can find principles that are normally associated with traditional, or in this case I shall intentionally use the nomenclature of ‘scientific’ history. For as we should remember the idea of scientific history is to use the

\(^5\) Emphasis added.
\(^6\) Emphasis added.
‘evidence’ to find out and tell history ‘as it actually happened,’ and a new history that takes this idea even further is quantitative history.

Quantitative history, or cliometrics, is a history that uses mathematical formulas to interpret quantitative historical information in order to determine what actually happened in our past. Mostly, cliometrics focuses on the history of economics but, it certainly does not limit itself to this field—as we will see. In Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s prologue, “Slavery and the Cliometric Revolution,” to their book, Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery, Fogel and Engerman discuss the advent of modern cliometric study and why it is a development that had to have been a recent one:

Although these data [having to do with the economics of the American slave system] have been available for some time, the techniques required to analyze and interpret them systematically were not perfected until after the close of World War II. Then a series of rapid advances in economics, statistics, and applied mathematics, together with the availability of high-speed computers, put information long locked in obscure archives at the disposal of a new generation of scholars.

The review based on these new techniques and hitherto neglected sources has contradicted many of the most important propositions in the traditional portrayal of the slave system.\(^7\)\(^4\)

One final point to emphasize from the work of Fogel and Engerman (at this time at least), is to point to their claim “that what is set forth [in the remainder of their book along with all others by cliometricians] represents the honest efforts of scholar whose central aim has been the discovery of what really happened\(^8\)\(^5\)” (8).

Another way in which we see quantitative history used is in the interpretation of data to elucidate the reasons behind historical trends. An illustration of this we turn to “The Strange Disappearance of Civic America” in which Robert D. Putnam tries to discover the reasons for the decline of civic mindedness of the American population over the past near-century of so. In this article, Putnam analyses the evidence in relation to the

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\(^7\) Emphasis added.

\(^8\) Emphasis added.
reasons that have been regularly put forth as the culprit/s—such as increasingly busy lives of citizens, economic hard times or conversely material affluence, an increase in the number of Americans changing where they live on a regular basis, suburbanization, etc., etc.—of this phenomena and concludes that none of these are the real cause/s, though some might have some degree of influence on the situation. Finally, Putnam makes his own determination, based on the evidence, to what the real ‘culprit’ is, noting that, “Although I am not yet sure that I have solved the mystery, I have assembled evidence that clarifies what happened” (1).

Now, while I do not intend to get into the whole of Putnam’s work, I feel that it would be advantageous to see the way in which Putnam goes about interpreting evidence to dispel some of the popular preconceptions about the reasons for the decline in civic mindedness in America. This example deals with Putnam analyzing the evidence for an increase in residential mobility being the reason for the aforesaid decline:

Data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995 (and earlier years) show that rates of residential mobility have been remarkably constant over the last half century. In fact, to the extent that there has been any change at all, both long-distance mobility and short-distance mobility have declined over the last five decades. During the 1950s, 20 percent of Americans changed residences each year and 6.9 percent annually moved across county boarders; during the 1990s, the comparable figures are 17 percent and 6.6 percent. Americans, in short, are today slightly more rooted residually than a generation ago. The verdict on mobility is unequivocal: This theory is simply wrong. (5)

The same sorts of statistical rational are used throughout the paper to discredit the “usual suspects” and to give credence to the advent of television as the reason behind the decline in civic mindedness in America, but as anyone would certainly be willing to cede on the matter—or any other quantitative matter—that statistical information is not always perfect and can be interpreted in many different ways (2).

So where does this leave us? We have seen the way traditional history focuses on the idea of agency in assigning historical responsibility and the way that the actions of an

9 Emphasis added.
influential person, or group of persons, move the events of history in this view. We have also seen the ways in which historical sociology searches for patterns and historical constructs and removes the idea on agency, except in the short term, from playing that much of an influential role in the making of history. In addition, we have seen gender history reexamine the idea of agency through the idea of gender constructs and place greater emphasis on the action of those who have historically left out in the traditional sense and deemed as inactive participants in history. And, finally, we have seen the ways in which quantitative evidence has been used, in the case of American slavery, to challenge the idea that slavery was a failed economic system that was only in use do to the racism of the plantation owners of the South and shown that slavery, on its face, was a profitable economic system that could have survived for many more years if it were not for the Civil War and its aftermath—thus removing historical responsibility from racist slave-owners and placing it, without moral judgment of course, on economic circumstances.

We have also seen the common thread among all of these historical philosophies is the idea that they are all trying to get at ‘what actually happened.’ However, parties on both sides of the fold take their respective pot shots at the other. Those who still believe in the traditional paradigm claim that fragmentation of history will make “it harder and harder for [historians] to talk to one another” due to the specific nature of each field that in turn leads to “charges of antiquarianism” from traditional historians (Burke 17, Sharpe 35). At the same time we have those who claim the traditional concept of history “as a relic of humanist thought” (Scott 145). The idea, that I believe, is most important while viewing this subject—and which I believe becomes even more clear after studying the arguments for a period of time—is clear: that both traditional history and the new histories are all parts of the same whole.
The ultimate goal of any historian is to present the past ‘as it actually happened.’ This goal can only be achieved by viewing all of the evidence and taking into account all of the perspectives and remembering that all history is told with a certain degree of personal bias on the part of the historian whether is be intentional or not—in most cases I am sure that it is not. As Fogel and Engerman note, “cliometrics provides a set of tools which are of considerable help in analyzing an important but limited set of problems,”—part of the whole (9). As Jim Sharpe says in his work, “History from Below,” the new histories, moreover those that are specifically oriented, “are at their least effective when confined in hermetically sealed boxes”—part of the whole (33). And as Joan W. Scott articulates, “Instead of a search for single origins [the idea of agency], we have to conceive of processes so interconnected that they cannot be disentangled” (145). This same point is also stressed by Sharpe he says that “by offering this alternative approach, history from below opens the possibility of a richer synthesis of historical understanding, of a fusion of the history of the everyday experience of the people with the subject matter of more traditional types of history” (33).

There is no doubt in my mind that this is the path that we must take in moving forward in our pursuit of historical study. To find out ‘what actually happened’ we are obligated to take into account all different perspectives and realize that there will never be one true answer as to what happened and why. There will only ever be the best interpretations of any number of historians trying to use the evidence to figure it out for themselves.

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10 Emphasis added.
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The Irish Famine: Lack of Food, Lack of Care

Brid Nicholson
Bystanding the Nazi Era, Germany
Sean Mullen

(Paper written for “Nazi Era Germany,” a course taught in 2007 by Dr. Dennis B. Klein)
Art Once Stolen by Nazis and Now Enjoyed by Us

Jacquelyn Tuerk

In January of 2008, an article in the Washington Post celebrated the return to Jewish owners of art stolen by the Nazis.¹¹ It reported the story of Fritz Glaser, a wealthy Jewish lawyer & collector of modern art. He lived in Dresden, was prevented from practicing law in 1933, survived the Holocaust as well as the Allied firebombing the 1945, and began practicing law again that same year.¹² His portrait with his family was painted in 1932 by the German Expressionist artist, Otto Dix.¹³

Otto Dix, Portrait of Dr. Glazer with his Family (1932)

During Nazi times, the article explains, Jews were routinely pressured to sell property at nominal prices. Glaser was forced to liquidate much of his collection, and after the war, he sold a few remaining pieces to raise cash, while other works of art were confiscated by the communists. Glaser's sole remaining heir, Uta Glaser, his daughter-in-law, sought to prove that Glaser was coerced into selling his treasures to Nazi art dealers. She used as evidence a few scraps of wartime letters and faded exhibition catalogs. (Her lawyer explained that in Germany today many museums don't want to give private researchers access to their archives to trace ownership.) The oil painting, *Max John* by Otto Dix (1920), is currently being fought over.

Otto Dix, *Max John* (1920)

Its fate is undecided, and the issue is hotly debated. Glaser’s daughter-in-law demands its return to her family, and the German museum that currently has it refuses. The conflict of interests over ownership of valuable artworks leaves museums arguing that there is no clear evidence of the history of art ownership on one hand, and on the other
hand, tens of thousands of people in Germany and elsewhere still seeking redress for theft of family heirlooms and resources during the Nazi era (not limited to stolen artwork, but including confiscated of houses, intellectual property, and slave labor).

Some steps have been made to address these claims. The Washington Post article framed this history within the Washington Declaration, a pact signed by Germany and 42 other countries in 1998 for returning art and other assets seized during the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{14} The Nazi process of taking assets began with what they called the “Aryanization” of Jewish property in the 1930s. Art was particularly useful to the Nazis as they looted about 600,000 pieces and regularly sold it to raise funds for their war machine.\textsuperscript{15} As part of the Washington Declaration in 1998, the National Archives and Records Administration (of the US Government) held a four-day symposium at the State Department in December of 1998: "Records and Research Relating to Holocaust-era Assets." Proceedings can be viewed online.\textsuperscript{16} A year after the Washington Declaration pledged to return some of these works, Germany issued a follow-up vow to comb its museum collections, but progress is slow. For instance, Germany's Lost Art Internet Database identifies 5,000 works of art owned by Jews in the Nazi years (1933-1945) that is now found in Germany institutions, but only 40 of these have been returned in the last five years. The

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Washington Post article suggests that German regulations governing such cases are complex and murky. Some rules state that all artwork sold by Jews in Germany after 1938 was under coercion, and thus no evidence of coercion is necessary to make a claim for return to Jewish owners. Other rules state that there must be clear evidence of coercion itself presented. Museum directors say the problem is lack of funds for this difficult research, and heirs to the works of art say there is a lack of will on the part of the museums. As a celebrated example, the article points towards Ronald Lauder, the President of the World Jewish Congress, a billionaire art collector well-known for purchasing re-claimed artworks from Jewish heirs, and co-founder of the Neue Galerie in NYC, who has purchased much artwork from Jewish heirs who won them back from European museums after heated disputes. A recent example of dispute is "Berlin Street Scene," by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner spent decades in a small state-owned museum in Berlin and was returned in 2006 to the granddaughter of the original owner, a Jewish art collector, Alfred Hess, who auctioned the painted for $38 million to the Neue Galerie (5th Ave and 86th).

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Berlin Street Scene* (1912-1913)
Ronald Lauder, posing with his recent purchase, Gustave Klimpt’s *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, was featured in a Reuters interview.\(^{17}\) (The painting is of oil, silver, and gold on canvas, dating from 1907.) He proudly paid $135 million for it— the most highly priced painting ever sold at that point. Klimpt’s work is a well-known masterpiece of Expressionism in Vienna. Though Klimpt was not Jewish, the owners of this painting were. Originally owned by the woman depicted, Adele, and her husband Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer (a wealthy Viennese sugar merchant), the painting was won back by their niece who then sold it at Christie’s auction house to the Neue Galerie in New York City. This example of return to the heir is a hopeful story, but there are others less hopeful.

But back to the Kirchner and its sale for $38 million to the Neue Galerie, The Washington Post article continues that examples of returned art and auctioned at high prices scarred many Germany art collections for fear that this legal claim would lead to further examples stripping their walls.\(^{18}\) In response, Germany's minister for cultural

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\(^{18}\) Also see Brigitte Werneburg, “Raiders of Lost Art: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's "Berlin Street Scene" will be auctioned off tomorrow at Christie’s in New York. Critics argue about whether the heirs of the former
affairs called a summit of museum directors in 2006 which reaffirmed that Germany had
a moral obligation to return stolen art, announcing the creation of an office for
provenance research. Other institutions established worldwide in pursuit of property
return include The World Jewish Congress, The Museum Security Network, The
International Property Restitution, and The Holocaust Claims Processing Office of the
US Government. The Washington Post article reports that some German museum
officials, however, criticize a continued lack of motivation in the German art world to
return stolen art. Martin Roth, managing director of the Dresden State Art Collections
(the second-biggest museum system in the country) stated in an interview to the
Washington Post: “In Germany, we say, 'Yes it's necessary, yes, we need to do it,' and
then we forget it.” The article states that re-gaining this painting by Kirchner, for
example, was difficult for the Glaser case because Jews in Nazi Germany weren't allowed
to own art or other property after 1938, so any records were usually destroyed. Glaser’s
son tried and failed. But after the 1998 Washington Declaration, his widow resumed the
family quest with the help of one clue: an exhibition catalogue from 1929 that listed this
painting in the collection of her father-in-law. And about the other painting by Otto Dix,
the Washington Post called public attention to the last of commitment of Germany
museums to investigate the provenance of art in their possession, reporting that in 2004 a
lawyer in behalf of Ute Glaser wrote the museum where it was hanging (the Freiburg
Museum of Modern Art in southwest Germany) asking if the museum had any records of
its ownership before 1959 when the museum purchased it at auction. The museum
replied that it did not, and nothing else to say, keeping the painting themselves. Jochen
Ludwig, director of the Freiburg museum, declined to comment to the Washington Post
on whether his institution attempted to do any more research on the ownership history of

Jewish owner really did have a claim to the painting.” Online at Museum Security Network Mailinglist
<msn-list at te.verweg.com> posted Friday 19 November 2006, 10:19:36 CET, accessed through
appeared in German in Die Tageszeitung on 6 November 2006, by Brigitte Werneburg who is cultural
editor at Die Tageszeitung.
"Max John" or if the work should be returned to Ute Glaser: "As far as I can recall, no demands were made for any action," he said. "Even if I could recall more, I would first need to consult our legal department." The Post gave a further example of another museum similarly charged (a museum in Munich, the Pinakothek der Moderne) about the painting "Harbor Scene" by Paul Klee. At first the museum responded to Glaser’s lawyer that they would try to clear up the painting's provenance, but were "skeptical" they would be able to do so. Glaser and her lawyer haven't heard from them since. Following this, however, the museum stated publicly that the painting's ownership history before 1968 "cannot be determined from the documents we have at our disposal." Normally, an artwork’s provenance is carefully recorded, especially those by famous artists, and those purchased by major reputable collections. The BBC in 1999 reported that most of museums resisting responsibility are in the former East Germany's communist bloc and in the former Eastern Bloc, including Russia.19

My personal concern here is my own interactions with these and similarly stolen works of art. I saw many of them in person for the first time when I was 19 years old on my first trip to Europe. I visited every modern art museum I could, and much of my education on modern art is rooted in this trip. I gratefully studied the painting by Klee in question, completely ignorant of its stolen origins, but wide-eyed about its color and composition. Now years later, I have a different relationship to it. But in both cases, I was an unwitting bystander and yet a certain beneficiary of an act of thievery by the Nazis. Any student and lover of modern art are likely to be so also. Now, I perceive both

19 “Stolen Nazi Art Returned,” BBC Online Network, posted Friday 4 June 1999 at 17:40 GMT <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/361165.stm> accessed 10 April 2008: “Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the Jewish Claims Conference in Frankfurt, which handles Holocaust-related restitution cases, has identified about 1,000 paintings and other formerly Jewish-owned artworks that ended up in Berlin or in museums across the former Eastern Bloc, including Russia.”
the beauty and horror within them. An article in The Jewish Press in 2006 posed the query that opened this up to other works of art stolen and now on display for public enjoyment. The article pointed out that no museum is about to offer to return its entire collection of Native American art, of pillaged African art (especially raided Egyptian tombs) and of Eastern art stolen by Western explorers. The British Museum regularly receives demands from governments demanding the return of stolen Greek and Roman artifacts and art. Most art is stolen, perhaps more than once.

![The Four Horses of San Marco](image)

The Four Horses of San Marco

For instance, the original owners of the celebrated Horses of San Marco are unknown, but of an ancient date, taken by a medieval Byzantine emperor to adorn his hippodrome (a race horse track). They were later looted by the Venetians in the 4th Crusade, taken by Napoleon to Paris, and then returned again to Venice where they are now. Again, here is a work of art that is regularly included in introductory surveys in art history. It stands as a monument to its continual re-appropriation. The textbook we use here at Kean is littered with stolen works of art. The original context is unknown and very long ago so

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that any line for descendants is highly complex. So its return is not in question. As such, it now stands as a monument to continual re-appropriation. But one of the differences with art stolen by the Nazis in particular is that it happened in recent history, and descendants of Jewish owners can be identified, with sufficient will to research. It is such a serious matter because the injustice of the Holocaust continues in living memory, and the theft of these works of art symbolizes an injustice much greater than any stolen material property. Therefore, their return to rightful owners symbolizes the will toward restitution of a much larger scale.

I and many others have been ignorant beneficiaries of stealing. One could argue that our hitherto ignorance was orchestrated by museum collections themselves, as they continue to benefit materially. But what now? How might museum goers register their concerns for justice? What would be the practical consequences for museum goers if so many stolen works of art were returned to private ownership and removed from public viewing? Practical consequences? What would be the moral consequences for museum goers if we were to be completely uninterested in this question? How much are we morally responsible for rectifying the crimes of others? How much are we responsible not to benefit from the crimes of others? Surely, most consumer activity engages immoral acts at some level. For instance, most of us have worn clothes made in India by child laborers with very little childhood to speak of. Where should we draw the line between feeling responsible for our choices on one hand and on the other hand, just throwing our arms up in frustration – we cannot hope to escape from benefiting from each and every act of crime, even the ones we know about. And where each of us draws this line surely shifts from experience to experience as we continually change as individuals. And in the cases that we do feel responsible for our choices, when should we act and when may we simply feel guilty? I am reminded by my brother that guilt is a
self-indulgence that seeks to excuse inactivity. (My brother is a clinical psychologist for trauma victims in wartime.)

After thinking about these questions, I can propose something that so far works for me. I propose that responsibility begins with the will toward education. For ignorance is the most wide-spread accomplice to crimes. And education and knowledge itself, I trust, transforms individuals in a world of wide-spread corruption. I know that this sounds grandiose, but actually, it costs the very least effort (especially within an academic community where learning abides) and it yields the deepest practical changes which always begin with changes of mind. Or… what about the opposite claim: that the proliferation of information engenders indifference? One thing is certain, that I am left with a sense of the deep beauty of these works of art, as well as the deep horror embedding within their history.

Gustave Klimpt, *Adele Bloch Bauer I* (1907)

FURTHER READING

The World Jewish Congress <http://www.worldjewishcongress.org>

The Arts Journal.com, “The Nazi Art Trail,”
<http://www.artsjournal.com/issues/Stolenart.htm>


The Strange Phenomenon of Really Concerned Bystanders

By Dennis B. Klein

The Kitty Genovese murder took place 44 years ago – not exactly an anniversary year for us but as good a time as any for reassessment and none too soon. For we are facing a brutal world crisis and, as in 1964, we are silent. The genocide in Darfur casts a stark light on a virtually universal indifference. Human rights activists once assumed that labeling a massive assault “genocide” would hasten an international response (the Rwandan lesson), but adopting the term for the Darfur assault in the U.S. Congress and in the U.S. executive office in 2004, when President Bush also invoked the U.N. Genocide Convention, failed to elicit a commensurate reaction.

The silence is a bit of mystery. Inaction customarily stems from a disregard for other peoples’ problems. In this case there is actually a high rate of public concern. Nearly two-thirds of Americans support their government’s use of targeted sanctions against Sudanese leaders and 82 percent favor sending an international force to Darfur (Genocide Intervention Network/Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and Harris Poll, respectively, December 2006). Outspoken critics garner considerable praise for their jeremiads about the situation’s abject urgency. Citizens assemble at rallies and meetings. This semester my university is organizing a conference, a photodocumentary exhibit, and a lecture on the subject.

But in truth there is really very little public involvement. There seems to be a disquieting disconnect between what people say and what they do. If not for the steady coaxing of human rights organizations and NGOs we would be a people with nothing but a mute conscience. Yet even here, the picture is ambiguous. One human rights organization claims to represent 130 million people belonging to faith-based, advocacy, and humanitarian groups. By that standard, the one-million postcards it recently marshaled to the White House and the $15 million it raised in 2006 suggest an unimpressive rate of active involvement. The problem is not the hard and intelligent work of NGOs. It is, rather, the naked quiescence entrenched in the grassroots. We are spending almost as much on entertainment as we are on charity, with the result that preventable worldwide afflictions remain at appallingly high rates.
Browbeating may be one strategy for addressing widespread inaction, but it rarely produces lasting results. More effective would be an illumination of the reasons for our silence. If we can sort this out there might be a better chance for translating our concern into action.

Lethargy is surely the obvious culprit. Enough people just don’t seem to care enough to take action. The memorable lyrics of Phil Ochs’s sulfurous commentary on the Kitty Genovese stabbing, “Outside of a Small Circle of Friends,” amplified the trial testimony of witnesses (there were 38 onlookers altogether) who, in one summary account, said laconically, “We didn’t want to get involved.” If a lack of will constitutes the best explanation for noninvolvement, why the indolence? It may be due to a skepticism about political leadership: the lackluster behavior of EU countries makes the U.S. deployment of economic sanctions seem impressive. Other countries – famously China, but also Libya, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia – are actively abetting the Khartoum campaign of human destruction. Stories about government corruption and inefficiency sabotaging the delivery of humanitarian aid add to the skeptical climate of public opinion.

Another reason for restraint is a belief that victims sometimes deserve their fate. The question arises, Did the Darfuri rebels provoke the Sudanese authorities into retaliation, especially at the vulnerable moment in 2003 when the government already just ceded power to southern Sudan after decades of civil war? A third reason involves the dissemination of information – not because there is too little but, paradoxically, because there is too much. Studies of this phenomenon shift attention from the bystander-victim relationship to bystanders’ relationships with each other. Because an awareness exists that others know about a crisis, people believe that others will help – especially those who appear to possess more leverage – relieving them of responsibility. In this suggestive light, the Kitty Genovese story is really a bystander-to-bystander problem: Did some, knowing that there were other onlookers, including those closer to the scene, assume that there was no reason even to call the police? Does this research suggest that even modest media attention to Darfur – enough attention to merit a high rate of Americans (two in three) who say they have heard at least something about the violence in Darfur serves to deter grassroots involvement? Can the same be said about the blinding visibility of vocal human rights organizations that transmits the unwanted message that someone else is taking care of business?
On the other hand, our silence may have little to do with an absence of will. It’s not that concerned citizens don’t care enough about Darfur to cross the line into resolute action; they just make choices about demanding situations and decide to address those that seem more salient. This theory requires an expansion of the field of vision to include a range of human behavior and not just the action or inaction to any one situation. Thus, a bystander to Darfur may be simultaneously someone who is giving money or attending rallies or lobbying their political representatives to help Tsunami or AIDS victims; or, if not a social cause, perhaps they are attending to community or family demands. Some people in Nazi-occupied Europe neglected the desperate pleas of Jews seeking shelter not because they were antisemitic but because they decided not to place their families in certain danger.

Given this argument, why doesn’t Darfur elicit a greater response than it does? The answer is partly a consciousness of in-groups and out-groups. To American citizens Darfuris are geographically distant and ethnically foreign; for some there might be an undercurrent of racism that inhibits a commitment to action. Perhaps governing cultural assumptions that determine political policies defer immediate help. The Irish famine received little attention by the British government in good part because of its commitment to the ideal of Irish “regeneration” that required Ireland’s people to solve their own problems. Anti-Irish prejudice played a significant part to be sure, but the belief that assistance would be morally crippling dampened relief efforts. We, too, labor with assumptions that discourage our involvement in Darfur, such as a belief in the paramount principle of national sovereignty and immunities – in this case, Sudan’s – or in the overriding importance of winning the East-West struggle for the soul of African and Middle Eastern nations: The United States does not want to sacrifice Sudan’s strategic importance.

Recognizing that there are multiple reasons to explain our noninvolvement offers an opportunity for identifying promising strategies to help us become engaged as well as concerned citizens. We should become better informed about the Darfur crisis and recognize that the rebels’ provocation was, itself, a reaction to hopeless circumstances and certainly no justification for Khartoum’s genocidal overreaction. We need to acknowledge that, even if others are involved, there is so much more we can do. We need to discover and support efforts that work – intervention doesn’t guarantee crisis relief and could make matter worse. Samantha Power suggests one example of action that will help:
Because “no U.S. president has ever suffered politically for his indifference to [genocide’s] occurrence,” in this election year we need to embarrass our representatives into taking effective measures. But none of this is anything more than words unless we search our own consciences to puzzle out the greatest conundrum of all: Do we believe that the genocide in Darfur is a crisis whose scale is so severe that it demands our prior attention and our determination to get and remain involved until the crisis eases?