STANLEY COHEN

STATES OF DENIAL

KNOWING ABOUT ATROCITIES AND SUFFERING

States of Denial

In memory of Stephanie

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Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering

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Polity

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Each of us is aware in ourselves of the workings of denial, of our need to be innocent of a troubling recognition.

—Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character*

People could find no place in their consciousness for such an unimaginable horror... and they did not have the courage to face it. It is possible to live in a twilight between knowing and not knowing.

—W. A. Visser't Hooft, Protestant theologian [reflecting in 1973 on the Churches' knowledge of the Holocaust]

All nationalists have the power of not seeing resemblances between similar sets of facts.... The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them.... In nationalist thought there are facts which are both true and untrue, known and unknown. A known fact may be so unbearable that it is habitually pushed aside and not allowed to enter into logical processes, or on the other hand it may enter into every calculation and yet never be admitted as a fact, even in one's own mind.... Every nationalist is haunted by the belief that the past can be altered.... Material facts are suppressed, dates altered, quotations removed from their context and doctored so as to change their meaning. Events which, it is felt, ought not to have happened are left unmentioned and ultimately denied.... Indifference to objective truth is encouraged by the sealing off of one part of the world from the other, which makes it harder and harder to discover what is actually happening.... If one harbours anywhere in one's mind a nationalistic loyalty or hatred, certain facts although in a sense known to be true, are inadmissible.

—George Orwell, *Notes on Nationalism*

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they
understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a
window or just walking dully along.

—W. H. Auden, *Musée des Beaux Arts*

To know and not to act is not to know.

—Wang Yang-ming

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Preface

My earliest memory that could be called 'political' goes back to a winter night in Johannesburg in the mid-nineteen-fifties. I must have been twelve or thirteen. My father was away from home for a few days on business. Like many South African middle-class families (especially Jewish and anxious ones), we employed for these rare occasions a 'Night Watch Boy': that is, an adult black man – in this case an old Zulu (I vividly remember the wooden discs in his ear lobes) – working for a private security company. Just before going to bed, I looked out of the window and saw him huddled over a charcoal fire, rubbing his hands to keep warm, the collar of his khaki overcoat turned up. As I slipped into my over-warm bed – flannel sheets, hot water bottle, thick eiderdown brought by my grandmother from Poland – I suddenly started thinking about why he was out there and I was in here.

My mother always used to tell me that I was 'over-sensitive'. This must have been my over-sensitivity at work, an inchoate feeling not exactly of guilt – this came later – but that something was wrong. Why did this old man have to sit out in the cold all night? Why had our family (and everyone like us) been allocated black men and women (who were called 'boys' and 'girls' or just 'natives') as domestic servants? Why did they live in tiny rooms in the backyard? Where were their wives, husbands and children? Why did they address me as '*baas*', or 'master'?

I don't remember what I did with my bedroom epiphany. Almost certainly, I just dropped off to sleep. But later, even when I began to think sociologically about apartheid, privilege, injustice and racism, I would still return to some version of that early psychological unease. I saw this unease – correctly, I believe – as arising from a sense of knowing that something was deeply wrong, but also knowing that I could not live in a state of permanent awareness of this knowledge. Without my deliberate intention, this awareness would switch itself on

or, more often, off. There might be weeks or months of blindness, amnesia and sleepwalking. Political education – later called 'consciousness raising' – made these phases less frequent, just as it should do.

Later, I started asking another question, one that I still discuss with people who grew up with me. Why did others, even those raised in similar families, schools and neighbourhoods, who read the same papers, walked the same streets, apparently not 'see' what we saw? Could they be living in another perceptual universe – where the horrors of apartheid were invisible and the physical presence of black people often slipped from awareness? Or perhaps they saw *exactly* what we saw, but just didn't care or didn't see anything wrong.

My academic life in sociology took me in quite different directions, but my childhood questions continued to float around. I collected and hoarded all sorts of material – newspaper cuttings, Oxfam appeals, Biafra and Vietnam war photos, quotes, book titles, bits of conversations. My fantasy was that one day I would integrate all this into what I pretentiously called a 'sociology of denial'. The subject, if not the pretension, remains the same: what do we do with our knowledge about the suffering of others, and what does this knowledge do to us?

It seemed self-evident that a common – perhaps universal or even 'natural' – reaction is to block out, shut off or repress this information. People react as if they do not know what they know. Or else the information is registered – there is no attempt to deny the facts – but its implications are ignored. People seem apathetic, passive, indifferent and unresponsive – and they find convenient rationalizations to explain themselves. I became stuck with the term 'denial' to cover this whole range of phenomena. I have never been able to find an alternative word – even though its conceptual ambiguities are so gross.

Nor was I entirely satisfied with the term that I adopted as the opposite of denial: 'acknowledgement'. This is what 'should' happen when people are actively aroused – thinking, feeling or acting – by the information. They respond appropriately, in the psychological and moral senses, to what they know. They see a problem that needs their attention; they get upset or angry and express sympathy or compassion; and they do something: intervene, help, become committed.

At first, my original South African questions pulled me only in the political direction: the suffering caused by injustice, racism and repression. Later, I began to think more about personal and family distress. The contrast between denial and acknowledgement seemed to appear everywhere – in the streets, appeals by charities, development or

human rights organizations, the mass media. Even my academic subjects – deviance, crime, social control, punishment – became relevant.

By this time, my obsession appeared from an unexpected direction. In 1980, I left England with my family to live in Israel. My vintage sixties radicalism left me utterly unprepared for this move. Nearly twenty years in Britain had done little to change the naïve views I had absorbed while growing up in the Zionist youth movement in South Africa. It soon became obvious that Israel was not like this at all. By the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, I was already disenchanted with the liberal peace movement in which I thought I belonged. I drifted into what in Israeli terms is the 'far left' – the margins of the margins.

I also became involved in human rights issues, particularly torture. In 1990, I started working with Daphna Golan, the Research Director of the Israeli human rights organization, *B'Ttselem*, on a research project about allegations of torture against Palestinian detainees. Our evidence of the routine use of violent and illegal methods of interrogation was to be confirmed by numerous other sources. But we were immediately thrown into the politics of denial. The official and mainstream response was venomous: *outright denial* (it doesn't happen); *discrediting* (the organization was biased, manipulated or gullible); *renaming* (yes, something does happen, but it is not torture); and *justification* (anyway 'it' was morally justified). Liberals were uneasy and concerned. Yet there was no outrage. Soon a tone of acceptance began to be heard. Abuses were intrinsic to the situation; there was nothing to be done till a political solution was found; something like torture might even be necessary sometimes; anyway, we don't want to keep being told about this all the time.

This apparent normalization seemed difficult to explain. The report had an enormous media impact: graphic drawings of standard torture methods were widely reproduced, and a taboo subject was now discussed openly. Yet very soon, the silence returned. Worse than torture not being *in* the news, it was no longer news. Something whose existence could not be admitted, was now seen as predictable.

There was something like an unspoken collusion to ignore (or pretend to ignore?) the whole subject. Thousands of Israelis and tourists walk everyday down the main street of Jerusalem, Jaffa Road, on to which backs the 'Moscobiya', the prison and detention centre in the Russian Compound. This was well known as a place where Palestinians were detained, interrogated and tortured by the *Shabaq*, the General Security Services. On 22 April 1995, a Palestinian suspect, Abed al-Samad Harizat, collapsed there after fifteen hours of interrogation. He died in hospital three days later without regaining consciousness. Harizat had been literally *shaken* to death – yanked up and

down by his shirt collar. An Israeli attorney (acting on behalf of the family) petitioned to have this practice designated as illegal. No, the High Court ruled, shaking was perfectly okay.

Pedestrians walk within a few yards of the cells where this happened. In the street and the crowded nearby cafés (in which police and *Shabaq* officers sit) there was no sign of anything out of the ordinary. The day after the High Court ruling, I overheard two fellow bus passengers casually arguing about what the lawyers actually meant by *tilltulim*, the Hebrew word for 'shaking'.

This was time of the *intifada* – the Palestinian civilian uprising that started in 1987, after twenty years of military occupation. The television world viewed the Israeli reactions: beatings, torture, daily humiliations, unprovoked killings, curfews, house demolitions, detention without trial, deportations and collective punishments. Israel got a few bad entries in international atrocity digests, such as the Amnesty annual report. Compared with other censured countries, Israel seems a haven of democracy and the rule of law. Active human rights organizations and good journalists report critically on what happens. And public information can be confirmed by private knowledge. Nearly everyone has some personal experience, directly or indirectly, of army service. Soldiers are not mercenaries or underclass conscripts. Everyone serves or has a husband, son or neighbour on reserve duty. Very few of them keep their activities secret.

Yet even liberals did not react in the way they 'should'. I kept wanting to say, 'Don't you know what's going on?' But of course they knew. I glibly saw this as yet another instance of denial – not the crude lying of cynical apologists, but the complex bad faith of people trying to look innocent by not noticing. Was this time for another report, press release, article or documentary driven by our touching faith in 'if only they knew?' Hardly. The information had been received but not 'registered', or (a better cliché) not 'digested'. It sunk into consciousness without producing shifts in policy or public opinion. Was there some deep flaw in the way we were trying to get our message across? Or was there a point at which the sheer accretion of more and better information would not have any impact?

It was natural to make the claustrophobic assumption that this problem was unique because Israel was uniquely horrible. Luckily our visitors from the international human rights community reminded us that the problem was universal. They were interested in information circulating in the international arena. How did audiences in North America or Western Europe react to knowledge of atrocities in East Timor, Uganda or Guatemala? I started imagining a nice thirty-something couple sitting, with their breakfast coffee and croissants, in

New York, London, Paris or Toronto. They pick up the morning newspaper: 'Another Thousand Tutsis Massacred in Rwanda'. In the mail plop two circular letters, one from Oxfam: 'While you are eating your breakfast, ten more children starve to death in Somalia', and one from Amnesty: 'While you are eating your lunch, eight street-children are killed in Brazil'. What does this 'news' do to them, and what do they do to the news? What goes through their minds? What do they say to each other?

I was back to my original preoccupations: reactions to unwelcome knowledge – especially about the suffering inflicted by human beings on one another. What is meant by saying that 'something should be done' about these atrocities? For governments, this suggests 'intervention' in the vague sense used in recent discourse about Bosnia, Iraq, Zaire, Rwanda, Kosovo or Somalia. For the ordinary public – my real interest – it means sympathy, commitment and action: give a donation, boycott a product, join an organization, adopt a prisoner of conscience, sign a petition, go to a demonstration. That is: 'acknowledgement' rather than denial.

I stored away my general 'sociology of denial' files again. In 1992, aided by a grant from the Ford Foundation, I started a project about how information about human rights violations is transmitted. The focus was international organizations, based in either the United States or Britain, and especially Amnesty International, the only one trying to reach the wider public. I also looked at charity, aid and development organizations; market research and advertising companies in the public interest sector; and mainstream and alternative media organizations. My sources were public reports, press releases, campaign material, advertisements, direct mailings and media coverage; meetings and conferences; and interviews with some fifty human rights and aid/development staff and twenty journalists. In 1995, this study was published as a report.[1]

Free at last from the insatiable demands of policy and practice, I returned to the safe world of theory and research. My start was Freud and psychological theories of denial, then topics where the concept was used – whether AIDS, homelessness or global warming. Meanwhile the psycho-babble phrase 'in denial' had become part of popular culture. Individuals and whole societies were slipping into denial about everything.

I then submerged myself in Holocaust studies and literature. My theory (almost certainly mistaken) must have been that if you even *tried* to understand this, then you could understand anything. I read more about genocide, massacres and torture, and watched movies about human suffering. My theory (certainly mistaken) was

that seeing more *representations* of suffering would teach me how to approach these subjects.

The result was not quite what I had planned. First, although I remain a sociologist, psychological language comes more naturally to me. Someone else will have to write a political economy of denial. Second, though I intended to look only at observers (bystanders) I kept being led to denials by perpetrators and victims. Third, I found myself drawing disproportionately on the Israeli case. This is not because it is especially awful – but because I lived there for eighteen perplexed years.

The 'average reader' whom I address is mostly the ethnocentric, culturally imperialist 'we' – educated and comfortable people living in stable societies. We are the objects of some chapters; but mostly we gaze at distant others in poor, unstable and violent places, which are in the news because of more cruelty and suffering, or in places where juntas, refugees, death squads and famine are never more than a memory away. But they live, construct and resist; they are not just the victims who appear in my pages. And 'we' have our ugly presents and past, our own unacknowledged social problems.

I concentrate on atrocities and human rights agencies, but also consider problems dealt with by aid, relief, health or development agencies and recently subsumed in the concept of 'social suffering'.[2] Unless otherwise stated, I use the general term 'humanitarian' to cover all these organizations. Except in dealing with psychological theory (chapter 2) and research (chapter 3), I have tried to avoid unnecessary academic citations. But now and then, I take pedagogic refuge and switch to writing a textbook for an imaginary course on the sociology of denial.

S. C.

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1

The Elementary Forms of Denial

One common thread runs through the many different stories of denial: people, organizations, governments or whole societies are presented with information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged. The information is therefore somehow repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted. Or else the information 'registers' well enough, but its implications – cognitive, emotional or moral – are evaded, neutralized or rationalized away.

Consider these common expressions and phrases:

Turning a blind eye
Burying your head in the sand
She saw what she wanted to see
He only heard what he wanted to hear
Ignorance is bliss
Living a lie
Conspiracy of silence
Economical with the truth
It's got nothing to do with me
Don't make waves
They were typical passive bystanders
There's nothing I can do about it
Being like an ostrich
I can't believe that this is happening
I don't want to know/hear/see any more
The whole society was in deep denial
It can't happen to people like us
The plan called for maximum deniability
Averting your gaze
Wearing blinkers

He couldn't take in the news
Wilful ignorance
She looked the other way
He didn't admit it, even to himself
Don't wash your dirty linen in public
It didn't happen on my watch
I must have known all along

Now consider the following items:

- The TV screen is full of images of human suffering, faces contorted in agony and desperation. Lost refugees, starving children, corpses in rivers. Sometimes we take a quite conscious decision to avoid such information. Often we are not aware of how much we either take in or block out. Sometimes we absorb all the information, but feel passive, powerless and helpless: 'there's nothing I can do about it.' Or we may feel angry and resentful: this is another demand, another nagging, guilt-inducing reproach – as with this United Nations Association's message: 'There are over 18 million refugees in the world today, fleeing from persecution, rape, torture and war, in Africa and Asia, South America and now here in Europe. You can close your eyes, close your ears, close your minds, close your doors, close your frontiers. Or you can open your heart.'
- Between 1915 and 1917, nearly one and a quarter million Armenians were massacred by the Turkish army or died during forced expulsions. The event was thoroughly documented in official records, survivors' accounts, witness testimonies and historical research. The main details were accepted without dispute soon afterwards by outside observers. But for eighty years, successive Turkish governments have consistently denied responsibility for genocidal massacres or any deliberate killings. Most other countries, particularly the USA and Turkey's other NATO allies, have colluded in this obliteration of the past.
- Villagers who lived around Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria from 1942 to 1945, were interviewed forty years later by an American historian, Gordon Horwitz. Many claimed that although they saw the smoke from the furnaces and heard rumours about the purpose of the camp, they did not really know what was going on. They did not ask too many questions at the time, and could not 'put together' what information they did have. Horwitz writes about the villagers' reactions: 'They never sought to inform themselves of what had happened. One encounters not a flat denial of the existence of the camps, only an indifference to their presence so

long ago. In some instances one may not talk of forgetfulness, for one cannot forget what one has never attempted to know.'[1]

- One night in New York in 1964, a woman named Kitty Genovese was savagely assaulted in the street just before reaching home. Her assailant attacked her over a period of forty minutes, during which she struggled, battered and bleeding, to reach her apartment. Her screams and calls for help were heard by at least thirty-eight neighbours who saw her or heard the struggle. But no one offered any assistance, either by directly intervening or by phoning the police. After thirty-five years, the event is still debated.[2] Social psychologists have studied intensely the 'passive bystander effect', publishing 600 pieces of research in academic journals. Every conceivable variable has been manipulated – both in real-life situations and simulated laboratory conditions – to discover how the bystander effect works and may be counteracted.
- A full-page newspaper advertisement from British Amnesty shows a photo of a Muslim woman, screaming with grief. The image is surrounded by a collage of words: *decapitated, massacres, mutilated, burned alive, babies thrown off balconies, pregnant women disembowelled.* The text starts: 'No words – there are no words – to express what this Algerian woman is feeling': her baby dashed to its death, her small daughter disembowelled, her mother's head rolling in the dust. *Words lose power*: 'Shocking headlines no longer touch us. We are not moved, we resent being manipulated. Experience says that you will read this page, turn over and forget it, because this is how you, like the rest of us, have learnt to cope with clamouring ads.'

These are some of the many states covered by my code word 'denial'. This is neither a fixed psychological 'mechanism' nor a universal social process. This chapter simply classifies the ways in which the concept of denial is used. At the risk of repetition, I also preview the themes of the whole book, but in an elementary way – without too many of the endnotes, sidetracks, theories and academic references that appear in later chapters.

Psychological status: conscious or unconscious?

Statements of denial are assertions that something did not happen, does not exist, is not true or is not known about. There are three possibilities about the truth-value of these assertions. The first and simplest is that these assertions are indeed true, justified and correct.

There are obviously many occasions on which individuals, organizations or governments are perfectly justified in claiming that an event did not happen at all, or not as it was alleged to have happened, or that it might have happened, but without their knowledge. These denials are simple statements of fact, made in good faith. Evidence and counter-evidence can be produced, claims checked, lies exposed, reasonable standards of proof presented.

Even without today's post-modernist scepticism about objective knowledge, these games of truth are highly volatile. It can be genuinely difficult to find out the truth about atrocities within the intricate circuit of claims and counter-claims made by governments, their human rights critics and opposition forces. Did the demonstrators use violence first, or did the police? Is this really torture, or 'intense' but legitimate interrogation? It is even more difficult to produce legal evidence, and often virtually impossible to establish causal responsibility. None the less, assertions of denial can be made in perfectly good faith. This is true for both governments ('there was no massacre') and individuals ('I didn't see anything').

A second possibility is also logically simple, though more difficult to identify. This is the deliberate, intentional and conscious statement which is meant to deceive – that is, lying. The truth is clearly known, but for many reasons – personal or political, justifiable or unjustifiable – it is concealed. The denial is deliberate and intentional. At the individual level, a few common words (lying, concealment, deception) will do. At the organized level (perhaps indicating the pervasiveness of lying in public life) more terms are in currency: propaganda, disinformation, whitewash, manipulation, spin, misinformation, fraud, cover-up. These are standard responses to allegations about atrocities, corruption or public wrongdoing. In the absence of evidence that the government must be telling the truth while everyone else is biased, unreliable and lying, most of us assume that most such official denials are indeed lies. A different form of conscious denial is the deliberate choice not to expose ourselves to certain unpalatable information. We cannot live in a state of continuous awareness of the fact that thousands of children are starving to death each day or dying of easily preventable diseases. So we make a conscious decision to switch off the sources of such information. This is like taking a different route to avoid seeing homeless beggars on the street.

Sometimes, though, we are not entirely aware of switching off or blocking out. This is the third and most intriguing set of possibilities. Denial may be neither a matter of telling the truth nor intentionally telling a lie. The statement is not wholly deliberate, and the status of 'knowledge' about the truth is not wholly clear. There seem to be states

of mind, or even whole cultures, in which we know and don't know at the same time. Perhaps this was the case with those villagers living around the concentration camp? Or with the mother who doesn't know what her husband is doing to their daughter?

The complex psychology of denial is the subject of my next chapter. The best-known psychological theory – well known enough to have entered into everyday language, though in a sense the most extreme – derives from psychoanalysis. Denial is understood as an unconscious defence mechanism for coping with guilt, anxiety and other disturbing emotions aroused by reality. The psyche blocks off information that is literally unthinkable or unbearable. The unconscious sets up a barrier which prevents the thought from reaching conscious knowledge. Information and memories slip into an inaccessible region of the mind.

Can this really happen without any conscious awareness – in the uncharted territory between deliberate choice and unconscious defence? Is this the normal suppression of background noise – allowing attention to be paid to more important matters – or a defence against a personally threatening perception? And is denial malignant (as with high HIV-risk groups denying their vulnerability) or benign (like the false hopes that allow terminally ill patients to continue living)?

The psychology of 'turning a blind eye' or 'looking the other way' is a tricky matter. These phrases imply that we have access to reality, but choose to ignore it because it is convenient to do so. This might be a simple fraud: the information is available and registered, but leads to a conclusion which is knowingly evaded. 'Knowing', though, can be far more ambiguous. We are vaguely aware of choosing not to look at the facts, but not quite conscious of just what it is we are evading. We know, but at the same time we don't know.

The political echoes of these states of mind may be found in the mass denial so characteristic of repressive, racist and colonial states. Dominant groups seem uncannily able to shut out or ignore the injustice and suffering around them. In more democratic societies, people shut out the results not because of coercion but out of cultural habit – turning a blind eye to the visible reminders of homelessness, deprivation, poverty and urban decay. Knowledge about atrocities in distant places is more easily rendered invisible: 'I just switch off the TV news when they show those corpses in Rwanda.'

Denial is also studied in terms of cognitive psychology and decision making. This approach emphasizes the normality of the process, and plays down its emotional component. Denial is a high-speed cognitive mechanism for processing information, like the computer command to 'delete' rather than 'save'. But this assumes the *denial paradox*. In order

to use the term 'denial' to describe a person's statement 'I didn't know', one has to assume that she knew or knows about what it is that she claims not to know – otherwise the term 'denial' is inappropriate. Strictly speaking, this is the *only* legitimate use of the term 'denial'.

Cognitive psychologists use the language of information processing, monitoring, selective perception, filtering and attention span to understand how we notice and simultaneously don't notice. Some even offer the neurological phenomenon of 'blindsight' as a model: one part of the mind can know just what it is doing, while the part that supposedly knows, remains oblivious of this. More obviously, information is selected to fit existing perceptual frames and information which is too threatening is shut out altogether. The mind somehow grasps what is going on – but rushes a protective filter into place. Information slips into a kind of 'black hole of the mind' – a blind zone of blocked attention and self-deception. Attention is thus diverted from facts or their meaning – hence the 'vital lies' sustained by family members about violence, incest, sexual abuse, adultery and unhappiness. Lies remain unrevealed, covered up by family silence, alibis and conspiracies.[3]

Not only families. Government bureaucracies, political parties, professional associations, religions, armies and police all have their own forms of cover-up and lying. Such collective denial results from professional ethics, traditions of loyalty and secrecy, mutual reciprocity or codes of silence. Myths are maintained that prevent outsiders knowing about discreditable information; there are unspoken arrangements for concerted or strategic ignorance. It may be convenient not to know exactly what your superiors or subordinates are doing.

This sounds close to the philosophical interest in self-knowledge and self-deception, especially the famous notion of 'bad faith'. For Sartre, contrary to psychoanalytical theory, denial is indeed conscious. Self-deception refers to keeping secret from ourselves the truth we cannot face. Sartre ridicules the theory that this happens through an unconscious mechanism that maintains the duality between deceiver and deceived. His alternative, 'bad faith', is a form of denial that the mind *knowingly* directs towards itself. But how do you lie to yourself? How do you know and not know the same thing at the same time?

These are the concerns of chapter 2. Political denial – the normal disinformation, lying and cover-up by public authorities – seldom calls for these subtle psychological questions. Denial is cynical, calculated and transparent. The grey areas between consciousness and unconsciousness are far more significant in explaining ordinary public responses to knowledge about atrocities and suffering, This is the zone of open secrets, turning a blind eye, burying one's head in the sand and not wanting to know.

Content: literal, interpretive or implicatory?

There are three possibilities as regards *what* exactly is being 'denied': literal, interpretive and implicatory.

Literal denial

This is the type of denial that fits the dictionary definition: the assertion that something did not happen or is not true. In *literal, factual* or *blatant* denial, the fact or knowledge of the fact is denied. In the private realm of family suffering: my husband could not have done that to our daughter, she is making it up, the social worker doesn't understand. In the public realm of atrocities: nothing happened here, there was no massacre, they are all lying, we don't believe you, we didn't notice anything, they didn't tell us anything, it couldn't have happened without us knowing (or it could have happened without us knowing). These assertions refuse to acknowledge the facts – for whatever reason, in good or bad faith, and whether these claims are true (genuine ignorance), blatantly untrue (deliberate lies) or unconscious defence mechanisms.

Interpretive denial

At other times, the raw facts (something happened) are not being denied. Rather, they are given a different meaning from what seems apparent to others.

In the personal realm: I am a social drinker, not an alcoholic; what happened was not really 'rape'. President Clinton smoked marijuana while he was a student, but never inhaled; so this was not really using drugs. As for later allegations about his sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, he followed his literal denial (nothing like this happened at all) by some original interpretive denial: oral sex was 'inappropriate behaviour' but not really a 'sex act' or 'sexual relations', and therefore there was no adultery or marital infidelity or screwing around. Indeed, there was no sex. So the president was not lying when he said that his relationship with Ms Lewinsky was not sexual.

In the public realm: this was population exchange, not ethnic cleansing; the arms deal was not illegal and was not really an arms deal. Officials do not claim that 'nothing happened', but what happened is not what you think it is, not what it looks like, not what you call it. This

was 'collateral damage', not killing of civilians; 'transfer of populations', not forced expulsion; 'moderate physical pressure', not torture. By changing words, by euphemism, by technical jargon, the observer disputes the cognitive meaning given to an event and re-allocates it to another class of event.

Implicatory denial

At yet other times, there is no attempt to deny either the facts or their conventional interpretation. What are denied or minimized are the psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow. The facts of children starving to death in Somalia, mass rape of women in Bosnia, a massacre in East Timor, homeless people in our streets are recognized, but are not seen as psychologically disturbing or as carrying a moral imperative to act. As a witness to a mugging in the underground, you see exactly what is happening, but you deny any responsibility as a citizen to intervene. Such denials are often called 'rationalizations': 'It's got nothing to do with me', 'Why should I take a risk of being victimized myself?', 'What can an ordinary person do?', 'It's worse elsewhere', 'Someone else will deal with it.'

As with literal denial, such assertions may be perfectly justified, both morally and factually. There is nothing you can do about death squads in Colombia; it might be quite stupid to try to stop a mugging. Rationalization is another matter when you do know what can and should be done, you have the means to do this, and there is no risk. This is not a refusal to acknowledge reality, but a denial of its significance or implications. My clumsy neologism 'implicatory denial' covers the multitude of vocabularies – justifications, rationalizations, evasions – that we use to deal with our awareness of so many images of unmitigated suffering.

At one extreme this vocabulary is wholly bland and unapologetic. We are either unable or unwilling to decode these messages. The folk idioms of detachment, unconcern and self-centredness are casually invoked: 'I don't care a shit', 'It doesn't bother me', 'Not my problem', 'I've got better things to think about', 'What's the big fuss about?', 'So what?' When these denials seem grotesquely inappropriate, we reach out for explanations: 'He obviously doesn't grasp what's going on' (he needs more information); 'she can't really mean that' (she is being disingenuous... deep down she really cares). Or, depending on the favoured discourse: he must be a psychopath, a moral idiot, a product of late capitalist Thatcherite individualism or an ironic postmodernist.

At the other extreme is the rich, convoluted and ever-increasing vocabulary for bridging the moral and psychic gap between what you know and what you do, between the sense of who you are and how your action (or inaction) looks. These techniques of evasion, avoidance, deflection and rationalization should draw on good – that is, believable – stories. These stories are difficult to decipher. Passivity and silence may *look* the same as obliviousness, apathy and indifference, but may not be the same at all. We can feel and care intensely, yet remain silent. The term 'implicatory denial' stretches words to cover all such states. Unlike literal or interpretive denial, knowledge itself is not at issue, but doing the 'right' thing with this knowledge. These are matters of mobilization, commitment and involvement. There is a strong sense, though, in which inaction is associated with denial – whether it comes from not-knowing or knowing but not caring. Hence the apocryphal reply by a British civil servant to a question about whether his government's policy in the Middle East derived from ignorance or indifference: 'I don't know and I don't care.'

Each mode of denial has its own psychological status. *Literal denial* may be a genuine and non-culpable ignorance; a deliberate aversion of your gaze from a truth too unbearable to acknowledge; a twilight state of self-deception where some of the truth is hidden from yourself; a cultural not-noticing because the reality is part of your taken-for-granted view of the world; or one of a variety of calculated forms of lying, deception or disinformation. *Interpretive denial* ranges from a genuine inability to grasp what the facts mean to others, to deeply cynical renamings to avoid moral censure or legal accountability. *Implicatory denials* come from some rather banal folk techniques for avoiding moral or psychological demands, but are invoked with mystifying degrees of sincerity.

Denial, then, includes *cognition* (not acknowledging the facts); *emotion* (not feeling, not being disturbed); *morality* (not recognizing wrongness or responsibility) and *action* (not taking active steps in response to knowledge). In the public arena of knowing about the suffering of others – mass media, politics, charity appeals – action is the issue. Oxfam and Amnesty want their information not to allow you to bracket off, ignore, forget and just go on with your life.

Organization: personal, cultural or official?

Denial can be individual, personal, psychological and private – or shared, social, collective and organized.

Personal denial

At times, denial appears to be wholly individual, or at least comprehensible in psychological terms: patients who forget being given a diagnosis of terminal cancer; spouses who put aside suspicions about their partner's infidelities ('I just don't want to know whether he is having an affair'); refusal to believe that our family and friends – our 'own people' – could act so cruelly. There is no public access to how these processes take place in a person's mind. In the Freudian model, they even remain unconscious and inaccessible to the self unless exposed with professional help.

Official denial

At the other extreme are forms of denial which are public, collective and highly organized. In particular, there are denials that are initiated, structured and sustained by the massive resources of the modern state: the cover-up of famines and political massacres, or deceptive violations of international arms boycotts. The entire rhetoric of government responses to allegations about atrocities consists of denials.

In totalitarian societies, especially of the classic Stalinist variety, official denial goes beyond particular incidents (the massacre that didn't happen) to an entire rewriting of history and a blocking-out of the present. The state makes it impossible or dangerous to acknowledge the existence of past and present realities. In more democratic societies, official denial is more subtle – putting a gloss on the truth, setting the public agenda, spin-doctoring, tendentious leaks to the media, selective concern about suitable victims, interpretive denials regarding foreign policy. Denial is thus not a personal matter, but is built into the ideological façade of the state. The social conditions that give rise to atrocities merge into the official techniques for denying these realities – not just to observers, but even to the perpetrators themselves.

Cultural denial

Cultural denials are neither wholly private nor officially organized by the state. Whole societies may slip into collective modes of denial not dependent on a fully-fledged Stalinist or Orwellian form of thought control. Without being told what to think about (or what not to think about) and without being punished for 'knowing' the wrong

things, societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what can be publicly remembered and acknowledged. People pretend to believe information that they know is false or fake their allegiance to meaningless slogans and kitsch ceremonies. This happens even in more democratic societies. Besides collective denials of the past (such as brutalities against indigenous peoples), people may be encouraged to act as if they don't know about the present. Whole societies are based on forms of cruelty, discrimination, repression or exclusion which are 'known' about but never openly acknowledged. These denials may be initiated by the state, but then acquire lives of their own. They may refer to other, distant societies: 'places like that'. Some are public and organized, but not 'official' in the sense of being sponsored by the state. A notorious example is the Holocaust denial movement.

The mutual dependency between official and cultural denial is most visible in the mass media coverage of atrocities and social suffering. The media image of the Gulf War was a masterpiece of collusive denial between the producers and reproducers of reality. Nor did the public really want to know more. The combination of official lying and cultural evasion is also clear in the language of the nuclear arms race: the use of war games analogies and other linguistic tricks to neutralize catastrophe. An entire language of denial has been constructed in order to evade thinking about the unthinkable.[4]

The point of 'consciousness raising' (feminist, political, human rights) is to combat the numbing effects of this type of denial. Assertions such as 'I didn't really know what happened to the Kurds in Iraq' call for radical changes in the media and political culture rather than tinkering with private, psychological mechanisms. We must make it difficult for people to say that they 'don't know'. Amnesty once prefaced a report with these words by Arthur Miller: 'Amnesty, with its stream of documented reports from all over the world, is a daily, weekly, monthly assault on denial.'[5]

There are also micro-cultures of denial within particular institutions. The 'vital lies' sustained by families and the cover-ups within government bureaucracies, the police or the army are again neither personal nor the result of official instruction. The group censors itself, learns to keep silent about matters whose open discussion would threaten its self-image. States maintain elaborate myths (such as the Israeli army's 'purity of arms', which asserts that force is used only when morally justified for self-defence); organizations depend on forms of concerted ignorance, different levels of the system keeping themselves uninformed about what is happening elsewhere. Telling the truth is taboo: it is snitching, whistle blowing, giving comfort to the enemy.

Time: historical or contemporary?

Are we talking about something that happened a long time ago and is now a matter of memory and history – or is it happening now? 'A long time ago' is a vague notion, but is a common-sense point between historical and contemporary denial.

Historical denial

At the personal, biographical level, historical denial is a matter of memory, forgetting and repression. It is commonplace to talk about remembering only what we want to remember. A more controversial claim is that memories of traumatic life experiences, notably childhood sexual abuse, can be totally blocked for decades but then be 'recovered'. Here we will be more interested in the denial of public and historically recognized suffering. Memories are lost or regained about what has happened to you (as victim), what you have done (as perpetrator) or know about (as observer). The Nazi period contributed two folk clichés to the lexicon of bystander denial: the 'good Germans' and 'we didn't know'. Such denials belong to the wider cultural pool of collective forgetting ('social amnesia'), such as the grossly selective memories of victimization and aggression invoked to justify today's ethnic nationalist hatreds. Sometimes, this amnesia is officially organized by the state, covering up a record of genocide or other past atrocities.

The Armenian and Holocaust cases combine both literal and interpretive denial (it didn't happen; it happened too long ago to prove; the facts are open to different interpretations; what happened was not genocide). More often, historical denial is less the result of a planned campaign than a gradual seepage of knowledge down some collective black hole. There is no need to invoke conspiracy or manipulation to understand how whole societies collude in covering up discreditable historical truths, as in the French myth of resistance that masked the record of collaboration with the Nazi occupation. Historical memories about suffering in distant places are even more prone to speedy and thorough deletion through the 'politics of ethnic amnesia'. Atrocities were denied at the time by the perpetrator government; the information flow is limited; there are either no geopolitical interests, or they are too strong to be sacrificed; victims are unimportant, isolated peoples in remote parts of the world. Some people make more suitable and memorable victims than others.