



BOOK REVIEW

States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering by Stanley Cohen.
Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001.

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In *States of Denial*, Cohen attempts to answer a set of questions that have long tormented researchers concerned with terrorism, war, and genocide: What do we do with our knowledge about the suffering of others, and what does this knowledge do to us? Is “acknowledgment” the opposite of denial? If so, what does it mean to acknowledge atrocity and suffering? Is there more to it than “sympathy, commitment and action.” And, although liberals are typically disturbed about atrocity and torture, why has there been no enduring and collective social outrage against such widespread human suffering?

Cohen is primarily concerned with the ways information about atrocities and suffering is transmitted to a larger audience. He works with a bounty of data – from media coverage, to human rights conference proceedings on AIDS, homelessness, and global warming, to dozens of interviews with human rights workers and investigative journalists throughout the Middle East, Europe, North, and South America. Cohen then examines this data in light of Freud’s work on the psychology of denial. From there, he submerges himself in Holocaust studies, as well as literature, photography, and movies on genocide, massacre, and torture.

For Cohen, government or individual denial of atrocity and suffering can take the form of several logical 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. First, it is possible that such assertions are, in fact, true and correct. It is possible that governments or individuals did nothing wrong and they are justified in claiming that an event did not happen. Such claims-making is often extremely volatile, however, and it “can be genuinely difficult to find out the truth about atrocities within the intricate circuit of claims and counter-claims made by government, their human rights critics and opposition forces.”

The second possibility is conscious denial through deliberate deception. That is, by lying. Even though facts about atrocities and suffering are clearly

known to perpetrators, survivors, and witnesses, for a host of either personal or political reasons, they are concealed. Governments do this all the time, of course, and the methods of deception can include elaborate forms of disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, whitewash, spin, and cover-up. A related form of conscious denial relates not to deception, but to “the deliberate choice not to expose ourselves to certain unpalatable information.” This form of denial is well known to both governments and individuals. Because none of us can live in a continuous state of awareness about starving children in Iraq, genocide in Rwanda, or entire African villages decimated by AIDS, we make the conscious decision to “switch off” the sources of such information.

Yet it is the third possibility that Cohen finds most useful: “Denial may be neither a matter of telling the truth nor intentionally telling a lie,” he suggests. “[And] [s]ometimes we are not entirely aware of switching off or blocking out. . . . There seem to be states of mind, or even whole cultures, in which we know and don’t know at the same time.” At the individual level, consider the mother who “doesn’t know” that her husband is sexually abusing a daughter. At the political level, consider the nation-state that turns a blind eye to concentration camps in neighboring countries (as they existed in Nazi Germany or Bosnia). By framing his analysis in psychoanalytic theory, Cohen arrives at the foundation of human denial:

Denial is understood as an unconscious defense 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.

One of the most compelling sections of *States of Denial*, I think, is Cohen’s application of this psychoanalytic theory to case studies of genocide, political massacres, disappearances, and torture. He reminds us that denials of crimes against humanity are not to be considered private states of mind. Rather, they are deeply embedded in popular culture, banal language codes, and state-encouraged legitimations. These “states of mind” spring from Sykes and Matza’s neutralization theory of deviance, wherein perpetrators “dispute the conventional meanings attached to their offenses or try to evade moral blame.” In a path-breaking advance in theory, though, Cohen extends Sykes and Matza’s original formulation by adding two new techniques to the mix. At the front end of the crime is denial of knowledge (perpetrators profess not to know what they or others around them did). This technique is highly volatile, and Cohen is quick to point out that public knowledge of atrocities

“varies according to political setting, length of conflict, control over mass media, visibility, geographical spread, proportion of population involved, and much else.” At the back end of the crime is moral indifference (the absence of appeals to conventional morality).

Cohen argues that the Holocaust “was already being denied as it happened.” Even before the trains rolled toward Auschwitz, advance planning for “maximum deniability” began, along with well-documented instructions of what to lie about. Cohen interprets this extermination message in terms of what Arendt referred to as “language rules.” The victims of Nazi atrocities were “deported” to “work camps” for “special actions.” In this way, the Nazis were able to simultaneously disavow the meaning of the Holocaust and claim that they did not understand it. “This is why the simultaneity of literal denial and ideological justification is essential,” says Cohen, “for perpetrators at the time, for later official rhetoric, and for bystanders.”

To further demonstrate this principle of simultaneity, Cohen provides a discussion on the Argentinian junta of the late 1970s, and that group’s use of such a double discourse. His analysis is prescient (the book was published before the attacks of September 11th); change a word here and there and Cohen could be describing not only the Taliban and Al Qaeda, but also the post-September 11th presidency of George W. Bush:

It invented a special language, a clandestine discourse of terror, to describe a private world whose official presence was publicly both denied and justified. At the official level, the junta’s discourse was not merely ideological, but messianic: ultimately, the ‘Dirty War’ was a defense of Western and Christian civilization. Argentina had become the place for the final battle of the forces of life against the forces of death. The public discourse was highly coded, full of sanctimonious – even metaphysical – references to purity, good and bad, and the sacred responsibility to eliminate opponents.

Cohen is equally prescient in his explanation of the moral indifference that occurs at the back end of a crime. He relies on various examples of both state and non-state terrorism to make this point: Hamas suicide bombers, Serbian ethnic nationalists, U.S. soldiers in the My Lai massacre, as well as Hitler’s henchmen. Cohen views these perpetrators of massacre, atrocity, and genocide in Orwellian terms. “They are technicians of violence,” he writes, “rather than ideologues.” Under this formulation, radical has less to do with the specifics of ideology (their convictions are secondary) than it does with a belief that denies the morality of their crimes. Religious zealots are often the most dangerous, for by definition they exclude the possibility of secular law or morality. Crimes committed by religious fundamentalists “do not require

any neutralization,” argues Cohen, “because there is no morally legitimate universe outside [their own] ideology. There is no need to be innocent of a ‘troubling recognition’ – because the recognition is not troubling.” This could very well describe the nineteen men who committed the suicide bombings of September 11th.

The question becomes, what we are to do with these profound insights on current affairs. For scholars, Cohen argues that the problem is not to uncover more evidence of denial, but to find the conditions under which information is acknowledged and acted upon. Instead of asking why most people deny atrocity and suffering, we must turn to the minority who refuse to do so. Cohen considers the conditions under which ordinary people do pay attention; how they come to recognize the significance of what they know; and when they are motivated to act, even at great personal risk. Personal risk is an important part of the territory, of course: When people begin to say what they really feel about the human condition and support people and causes according to their conscience, they challenge the status quo. As a consequence, the system will punish them.

This process begins with turning off the television, at least corporate-controlled television with its state-filtered programming. “Mass media images of atrocity and suffering seldom suggest a channel for action,” Cohen argues; “They are random texts about random horrors.” Responsible action is more likely to result from an incident wherein ordinary folks become personally affected by the suffering of others. Cohen writes:

There are unpredictable moments when a particular image of suffering cuts right through us: a literal wrenching of the heart, a silent tear, that “sees” the desperation on a child’s face. But these moments cannot be programmed in advance.

They have to occur naturally. Once they do, some will find “the right channel of action or improvise on their own,” sort of a “Do It Yourself” approach to human rights. This can take many forms: joining a human rights collective or starting one, attending a study group, teaching a peace studies course, mobilizing a “caring network,” protesting, witnessing for peace, blowing the whistle, or even recording evidence of human rights violations with a video camera.

Cohen makes the observation that this course of action is not for everyone. If it were, the world would be full of people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa. History shows that these were exceptional people, truly extraordinary in their commitments to peace and social justice. There is a convincing symmetry to Cohen’s argument: If evil people – those who carry out atrocities and deliberately let others suffer – are a small minority,

“so too are those who have the time, energy, and commitment to devote their lives to the cause of human rights.” But why are some people so completely dedicated to rescuing their brothers and sisters?

Cohen offers a developmental theory to account for this rare human trait. “There are some people,” he writes, “who, often from a very early age, seem unable to deny. Their moral and emotional sensitivities are so finely tuned, their membranes so thin, that they recognize everything, acutely pick up and even ‘feel’ the agonies of others.” For them, there is no option to altruism. “These people reacted instinctively” says Cohen, “they did not look for accounts or neutralizations why not to help.” Rescuing others from peril may be something performed by extraordinary people, but for them it is an unextraordinary act because it expresses the values and beliefs of their innermost core.

As they grow into adulthood, altruists become overwhelmed by information about horrors, unable to discriminate between minor and major forms of suffering. To cope with this dilemma, they must “find some socially acceptable way to channel or muffle their acute sensitivity.” They become artists, investigative journalists, documentary film makers, writers, or photographers. They become medical, legal, or human rights professionals dedicated to alleviating the suffering of others. And finally, as they age, they learn to wisely pick their battles. Cohen concludes that “the really effective people are self-consciously selective about which problems they take on. ‘Doing something’ is possible only if they do not allow themselves to be overwhelmed – or take on a romantic identification with their chosen victims that blurs their judgement and sense of justice.” Nor do they become blinded by the romance of their own altruism. Instead, they demonstrate what Cohen calls a banality of virtue (an ingenious play on Arendt’s classic banality of evil metaphor used to explain the Nazi atrocities), in which people act with a “common-sense decency; not thinking of themselves as doing anything special . . . helping because this was simply the obvious thing to do.”

Cohen concludes his treatise with several prognostications. He begins with a indictment of post-modern theory, in which truth and reality are explicitly interpreted through the lens of power and privilege. Because no absolute moral imperatives can be drawn from particular bodies of information (or text), “morality and values are relativistic, culturally specific, and lacking any universal force.” Every text is the product of some form of narrative. And because all narratives reflect some form of self-interest, post-modern theorists assert that there can be no way to distinguish factual, historical information from situated “stories” or “multiple narratives” that compete equally and openly in indeterminate searches for the truth. Epistemology is therefore relative—it all depends on who is de-constructing which historical record.

Cohen sees this as a pernicious intellectual development because of its potential to advance untenable forms of denial. “If there is no foundational base for morality,” he argues, “then it is impossible to stake out universal values such as those enshrined in human rights declarations.” As a case in point, Cohen considers how post-modern theory can be used to encourage the cause of Holocaust denial. Because Holocaust deniers are able to assert that they are simply offering an “alternative voice” about historical events, they are able to claim that Holocaust denial is simply “the other side” or a “different” version of the truth. Cohen blasts the practical implications of such claims-making. “You cannot appeal to the relativism of knowledge to turn ‘Holocaust assertion’ and ‘Holocaust denial’ into positions of equal currency in a high school debate,” he writes. “These *are not* two ‘points of view’ – one position is simply a fanatic rejection of evidence and a refusal to abide by the rule of rationality” (my emphasis).

Rejecting this moral relativism of post-modern theory, Cohen returns to the intellectual roots of Western liberalism, back to Orwell Chomsky. In this tradition, “the intellectual responsibility of the writer as a moral agent is obvious: to try to find out and tell the truth *as best one can* about *matters of human significance* to the *right audience* – that is, an audience *that can do something about them*” (emphasis in the original). That audience includes not only those with the power to directly alleviate suffering and distress, but anyone who has benefitted from the recent evolution of a more universal, compassionate, and inclusive consciousness brought about by global communications technology. Recognizing that old structures of loyalty and identity (nation, class, religion, trade unions) have lost much of their authority, Cohen is hopeful about this new social movement: the globalization of information networks with their sophisticated means to increase public awareness of human suffering.

Cohen considers, for example, the creation of a universal culture within rock music that allows the rapid transmission of humanitarian appeals. Bono of the Irish rock band U2 is an example of this. Drawing on the expertise of his fan base (through the band’s web site), he has helped peacekeepers in Sarajevo, educated himself on Third World problems, and used this information to gain audiences with Pope John Paul II, Bill Gates, and U.S. Presidents Clinton and Bush. Through these efforts, he has helped erase \$350 billion in public debt from the world’s poorest countries. He has recently expanded his African agenda to include billions of dollars to fight AIDS in return for promises of democracy and transparency across the continent. And in this way, Bono has created a real and tenable agenda for solving both the problems that led to September 11th and the war that followed. Importantly, this is a problem-solving agenda that is accessible to anyone in the world

who owns a computer and a boom box. “There are potentially another ten Afghanistans in Africa,” said Bono to *Time* magazine, “and its is cheaper by a factor of 100 to prevent the fires from happening than to put them out.” Cohen laments that such profound suffering “makes moral imbeciles of us all.” Yet he also recognizes that this recent global media exposure on subjects like AIDS, famine, debt relief, and illegal arms deals “goes well beyond any sixties radicals’ expectations and knowledge.”

Intellectuals can play a considerable role in this emerging humanitarian movement, argues Cohen, by “making more troubling information available to more people. Informed choices requires more raw material: statistics, reports, atlases, dictionaries, documentaries, chronicles, censuses, research, lists.” He fills in the substantive concerns of these materials in the final, moving passage of his book:

Someone has to inform us *exactly* how many children in the world (and just *where* and *why*) are still dying of measles, are conscripted as twelve-year-olds into killer militias, are sold by their families into child prostitution, are beaten to death by their parents. This information should be regular and accessible: rolling in front of our eyes like the news headlines on the screens in Times Square.

