

Are Killers Ordinary Men?

The nearest large town to where I live when I am in France is called Alès. Having once been a centre of coal-mining, it is not very beautiful, unlike most of the towns in the region. It is rarely in the news, though occasionally it is the scene of a minor riot among the unemployed youth.

Recently, though, it – or its abattoir – made the national news. Someone from the society for the protection of animals managed to obtain a video of what went on in it, of seemingly everyday practices, and the scenes were so terrible that the mayor peremptorily closed the abattoir down. It had broken all the rules and regulations regarding abattoirs; there had long been suspicions about it and the official inspectorate had already placed injunctions on it to reform its practices.

It is said that animals have no conception of their impending death and one should not anthropomorphise them, but it is very difficult on seeing the pictures not to believe that the animals – pigs, cows and horses – were aware at the very least that something terrible was about to happen to them: and they were right, it was.

I won't describe the scenes, but they are easily enough found on the internet. You tremble as you watch them, and most people will want to look away from them. They are not Hollywood horror, they are the real thing; the lambs are not silent. If you knew your meat was coming from Alès – as most of it in the surrounding region does – you wouldn't buy or eat it. The question naturally arises as to whether the scenes are unique to the abattoir of Alès, or whether they are general in France, Europe and the world. About a quarter of the abattoirs in France have been placed under injunctions similar to those placed on Alès before the video was released.

The abattoir employed about thirty people. In the film, you

see them going about their business as if it were normal to suspend live pigs that had survived gassing with carbon monoxide by their hind legs and cut their throats as they squirmed in terror – amongst other tasks of a similarly horrible nature. Presumably they did this day after day, though actually there is no way of knowing how the film was edited, whether the scenes selected were exceptional or routine. However, there is no obvious reason why they should have been anything other than routine.

From the psychological point of view, there are several important questions. Were the staff of the abattoir a self-selected group of people, drawn to that kind of work and therefore susceptible to the allure of cruelty, or were they, to quote the title of the book by Christopher Browning about a genocidal reserve police battalion in Poland during the Second World War, 'ordinary men.' What were they thinking as they behaved in the fashion shown, seemingly calm in the midst of an Armageddon? Were they motivated by the fear of losing their jobs if they did not obey orders, fill quotas set by management. etc.? Were they horrified at first and merely habituated themselves to what they saw and did? Were they afraid to appear weak and sentimental in the eyes of their colleagues? Did they justify their actions by, for example, theoretical denial of the self-consciousness of animals, or did they think there was simply no ethical question to be answered? And what was the effect on them, if any, in general? Did they go home to their wives and children (I assume most if not all of the employees were male) and behave as if they had merely done a normal day's work, as if the abattoir were an office, or did they become sullen, withdrawn, depressed, paranoid, hypersensitive, aggressive or even violent – assuming that they had been none of these things before? Did they turn to drink or drugs, as Browning's 'ordinary men' had done? What was the turnover of the staff, did most of them actively seek employment elsewhere? Did any of them commit or attempt suicide? Or did they actually enjoy what they were

doing? Who in the end will be blamed, and for what proportion of the responsibility?

Then again there is the question of whether the revelations will decrease the consumption of meat in the region supplied by the abattoir, and if so for how long? What efforts will anyone make to ensure that conditions have improved before they resume eating meat? What will those who continue eating meat after having seen the film tell themselves by way of moral rationalisation? How will they relegate the scenes they have witnessed to a corner of their minds as they eat their local (and very good) saucisson? I doubt that any of these questions will ever be answered, and perhaps not even asked.

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