

The Pleasure of Apparatchiks



Pietà, Bernard Buffet, 1945

Why do I—or he, or she, or they—behave like this? Naturally, my patients asked this question only when the behaviour was undesired or undesirable (not quite the same thing). When all was going well, no one ever asked the question.

“What would count for you as a satisfactory explanation?” I asked them in my turn. “At what point would you say ‘Ah, *now* I understand?’”

They never could answer. Perhaps my question was unfair, for there is no final explanation of anything in Nature, let alone human conduct. There is always an infinite regress and therefore a final, wholly satisfactory explanation always evades us.

Yet very occasionally in my work, I *did* find a semi-satisfactory explanation of strange behaviour, for example

when an old person in the hospital began to behave with unaccustomed awkwardness, even violently, and I discovered that the level of sodium in his blood was low. Restoring it to normal restored the person's behaviour to normal, so that in a sense I believed that I had 'explained' his previous abnormal behaviour. But why was the level of his sodium low in the first place, why, when he was behaving strangely, were the contents of his delusions what they were, why did he react in this way to a low level of sodium when someone else with a similar level did not? Nevertheless, for all practical purposes, I felt I had sufficiently explained his behaviour; no need to look any further, except in so far as more knowledge is preferable to less.

Of course, the phenomenon that was half-explained by a low sodium level was very simple by comparison with the phenomena for which my patients asked an explanation. And though we know in advance that our enquiries into the origins of human behaviour are doomed to failure, yet—as humans—we cannot help ourselves making them. We desire to know what cannot be known.

Most of us are especially fascinated by the extremes of human behaviour, especially in the direction of evil, notwithstanding the fact that we make little progress in our understanding of it. But however little progress we make, we persist in our efforts (at least, I assume that many others are like myself in this respect). For this reason, I fell eagerly upon a book, though in truth I hardly expected to learn a great deal new from it, recently published in France, titled *Dans la tête des SS (In the Heads of the SS)*, by Serge de Sampigny.

The author is not so much a writer as a producer of television documentaries. He wrote the book as an account of his attempt make a television documentary consisting of interviews with the last surviving members of the SS whom he and his team of researchers were able to trace, interspersed with sequences of films taken during the Third Reich.

I do not know the world of television at all well. I have not owned a television for more than half a century and I have not found my few contacts with the medium as a performer very encouraging. I am not sure that the late Neil Postman was right when he said that the medium itself is intrinsically trivialising but, though he might have been wrong in theory, he was right in practice. Discussions on television—at least the ones in which I have participated—have become more and more futile over the years, as producers assume that their audience has a shorter and shorter attention span and tolerance of logic, and therefore give invitees an ever-shorter time to develop an argument. Most discussions have become a series of assertions, take them or leave them, not even necessarily relevant to one another. Everyone has a fundamental point that he is determined to make, and makes it irrespective of whether it is appropriate at that moment to do so. Repetition and disregard of what others say is the highest form of refutation.

Early in the book, Sampigny recounts an experience very similar to mine nearly thirty years ago. He presented his idea for his documentary to France's major TV chains without success. Those in charge of commissioning documentaries thought, or claimed to think (in this cultural milieu, it is very difficult to tell the difference between what is actually believed and what people affect to believe or think they ought to believe), that his interviews with old SS men might stimulate or encourage neo-Nazism and cause offence or pain to the survivors of the death camps or to their descendants. The first of these fears seems to me to indicate the contempt in which the purveyors of television hold their audience: for if it were really true that a few interviews with nonagenarians might stimulate or encourage neo-Nazism to a socially and politically significant degree, what must the opinion of the commissioners be of the intellectual and moral qualities of their audience? By contrast, they have no qualms about exposing young children to a constant mental diet of extreme

violence.

Thirty years ago, I was asked by two film-makers to be a consultant to a film about Guatemala that they proposed to make, having had recent experience of that country. The film was to be an adaptation of a novel—not a particularly good one from the literary point of view, but cinematically promising. The project never got off the ground, but the two film-makers, for whom I had a high regard because they viewed their profession as a vocation and were untouched by the condescension towards the public that was so common (as I had discovered) in such circles. They were, in their way, true idealists: they believed that an audience could and should be interested in matters of the mind and not just cheap sensation. They asked me whether I had any ideas for an interesting television series.

Until then, I had never given a moment's thought to such a project, but immediately, without the slightest hesitation, I proposed a series of interviews with exiled dictators who had fallen—been ousted—from power. In those days, some of the ex-dictators were bizarre and flamboyant, for example the Emperor Bokassa and Idi Amin. Baby Doc was still alive; Pinochet and Mengistu might surely have had something interesting to say, for even if their thoughts were entirely banal, for their banality in itself would be interesting.

I thought, and still think, it was an excellent idea. The two film-makers asked me to produce an outline of my proposal, which I did with alacrity. I would interview the ex-dictators in a dispassionate, quasi-medical manner, the better to let them reveal themselves. I thought the interviews might even be of some permanent historical value, for some of the ex-dictators were not long for this world and the opportunity would never come again.

The film-makers were enthusiastic: they had immediately seen the point of the proposed series. But the television

companies, to whom they had to sell the idea (literally, for they needed funding) ground their enthusiasm down until they gave the project up. One episode in particular stands out in my mind.

We were called to the offices of one of the companies for a meeting in which the two film-makers, experienced in these matters, would put forward the proposal (they were to do all the talking). We arrived well before the appointed time to ensure that we did not keep any important person waiting.

On the contrary, we were ourselves kept waiting before being ushered into the office of a woman in her late twenties or early thirties, she it was with whom we had our appointment. When we entered her office, she had her back resolutely turned to us, and she was talking into a telephone. Presumably she knew we were there, for it was she who must have given the order that we should be ushered in. I had the distinct impression that she prolonged her telephone call merely to make us wait and to show us how important she was.

Eventually, she swivelled round on her office chair, and looked at us. Her first words were memorable.

“Who are you and why are you here?” she asked.

She was good looking, in an icy way. I was taken aback by her unmannerliness. If it had been left to my inclinations, I should have walked out there and then but by now I had developed a sense of loyalty towards my two film-makers who were cultivated, intelligent, and humorous men, and I did not want to spoil their chances of a commission. They told me afterwards that this was the kind of treatment that they had repeatedly to put up with if they were to get any work at all.

Of course she knew perfectly well who we were and why we had come: she had made the appointment herself. But one of the film-makers answered as if her questions had been the most normal in the world.

A soft answer turneth away wrath, says the Good Book, but it does not turn away arrogance and the exercise of arbitrary power.

“Well,” she said, “tell me.”

The two film-makers explained the project, though she was already aware of its contents. They finished their presentation.

Then the Oracle spoke. I have no idea how far up in the hierarchy of the company she was: I suspect that she had the power to say “No” but not the power to say “Yes.” As if she had given the matter prolonged and deep thought, she put the fingers of her two hands together, making a kind of church roof of them, and then said:

“I’m worried that you will be giving a platform to the dictators.”

I am afraid that I could stand it no longer. I stood up.

“Madam,” I said, “I have every respect for the stupidity of the British public, but even the British public does not have to be told that eating children is wrong.” With that, I walked out.

The two film-makers followed. I regretted what I had done as soon as I had done it. I thought that I had ruined their chances of a commission, but they laughed. It was obvious to them that no such commission would have been forthcoming, however long they exposed their ideas. Their attitude gave me permission to fulminate.

You might have thought from her manner that everything shown on television was an imperishable masterpiece instead of being overwhelmingly rubbish. “*I’m worried*,” indeed. The only thing that bitch has ever worried about is her career.

The two film-makers told me that they were used to her kind of

treatment, it was a hazard of the job, as explosions were a hazard of bomb-disposal experts. They mentioned to me also that it was perfectly possible that the company liked the idea, but would commission someone else to do it, someone more televisual than I: for there was no copyrighting of ideas. But in fact, the series was never made, and now it is too late.

I was angry for two reasons: first on behalf of my two filmmakers who did not deserve to be treated in this manner, and second at the lack of imagination of those in charge of television (in those days, the internet had not yet taken off). I resolved never to have anything to do with the world of television again, though in fact I have appeared on it briefly a few times since.

But the experience was valuable, in a way. It gave me an insight into the pleasure experienced by apparatchiks obstructing the creative and imaginative, such power to do so being a kind of consolation prize for being without original ideas of one's own. And this brings me back to the book about the SS. The author succeeded in interviewing only a few of the surviving SS men whom he traced, but they were all notable both for their willingness to give up thinking for themselves because, in the words of the SS slogan, "fidelity is our honour" (fidelity to orders that is), and their joy in exerting absolute power in the execution of those orders. They were both powerless and powerful. In essence, they were ambitious nonentities, for whom a rise in the hierarchy was a substitute for self-direction and real achievement, and which was worth any amount of personal depravity.

There is nothing wrong in itself with being a nonentity; we are all nonentities in some regard or other, perhaps in many regards; but ambition is what makes nonentities dangerous.