

SLOW INJUSTICE

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Injustices that happen gradually, over a long period of time without dramatic events, are harder to recognise and mobilise against. Nevertheless, it is possible to bring such injustices to public awareness.

Sudden, dramatic events capture attention and, if they are seen as unfair, generate outrage. The 9/11 attacks, killing nearly 3000 people, triggered an enormous reaction. But the death of 3000 people in a slower process may occur without so much awareness. For example, consider the 200,000 people, mostly indigenous, killed by Guatemalan government forces in the 1970s and 1980s. Or the 3000 people killed on the roads in the US every month. The 9/11 attacks caused many travellers to avoid aeroplanes and travel by car, thereby increasing the travel accident death rate because road travel on average leads to more fatalities per kilometre than air travel. This may have led to as many excess deaths as caused by 9/11 itself, but these thousands of deaths are completely unnoticed (Gigerenzer 2003).

The speed at which events occur is only one factor influencing people's perception of their significance. There are others.

- **Unfairness:** if something is seen as unjust, it causes more concern. For most people, killing of civilians in peacetime is seen as less justified than killing soldiers in a war.
- **Official endorsement:** when political authorities or scientific experts support a claim, many people are more likely to accept it.
- **Labelling:** a suitable name can stimulate awareness and concern. The expression 'sexual harassment' highlighted behaviours that had been occurring for generations, opening them to greater scrutiny and opposition.
- **Openness:** open injustices usually cause more outrage. A killing in public is likely to generate more concern than one hidden

from view. This is one reason why torture is almost always carried out secretly.

- **Presence:** when individuals under threat can be identified, concern is greater. A few miners trapped underground may elicit more action than the statistical likelihood of hundreds of preventable but anonymous deaths.
- **Vividness:** a problem that can be pictured, in dramatic terms, usually results in more response. A problem that is abstract or conceptual is less likely to capture the imagination. A picture of one malnourished child may have more impact than data about the thousands who die every day from starvation.
- **Size:** big events capture more attention than a series of small ones. A massacre attracts far more attention than a series of murders.
- **Timing:** things that have already happened, especially recently, may generate more concern than ones that might happen or are expected to happen.
- **Closeness:** events that occur nearby usually have greater significance than remote ones. Closeness may be in terms of physical or cultural distance.

Table 1 compares 9/11 with Guatemala in the 1970s/1980s (on which see Manz 2004; Perera 1993; Sanford 2003; Simon 1987), suggesting why US audiences perceived 9/11 as far more significant. (Guatemalans might respond differently, of course.) Each factor mentioned here is important and worthy of study; there are studies of some of these issues,

Table 1. The events of 9/11 compared with Guatemala according to a series of factors

Factor	9/11	Guatemala
Unfairness	High: universally condemned in the West	Fairly high: condemned by most who knew about it except for the Guatemalan government and some others
Official endorsement	Nearly all governments immediately condemned the attacks	Muted response by foreign governments; condemnation by UN commissions; US President Reagan supported Guatemalan government
Labelling	"Terrorism"	"Scorching communists" (Guatemalan government); "killing"; less commonly, "genocide"
Openness	Attacks in public; immediate saturation media coverage	Attacks away from outsiders; moderate media coverage
Presence	Most victims identified afterwards and known in US	Most victims identified afterwards and known in Guatemala
Vividness	Dramatic pictures	Mostly abstract; few pictures
Size	3000 dead, most of them in New York	Killing of individuals, small groups and entire villages in different places (200,000 total)
Timing	Happened on 11 September 2001	Happened in 1970s and 1980s
Closeness	New York primarily	Guatemala
Speed	Deaths occurred in one day	Deaths occurred over many years

for example labelling (Poole 2006), presence (McKie and Richardson 2003) and vividness (Cohen 2001). Here, my focus is on just one factor, speed. The table suggests that in comparing two disparate events, it is not likely to be easy to separate out speed, or any other factor for that matter. Therefore, it is useful to consider some closer analogies than 9/11 and Guatemala.

In the next section, I describe some directly comparable events, showing the importance of speed in perceptions of injustice. Then I turn to some indirect comparisons that also suggest the role of speed. But it is possible for activists to overcome the obstacle of slowness: I examine several cases where this has happened. In the conclusions I spell out the implications of this analysis.

Direct Comparisons

The 2003 invasion of Iraq was the subject of enormous protest, with millions of people

demonstrating worldwide in February. The scale of protest was unprecedented and was even more significant considering that it occurred before the invasion was launched the following month. Usually, protests are greater after wars have begun. The protesters could not have known how subsequent events were to unfold, but it is worth mentioning that a large number of Iraqis have been killed in subsequent years, with estimates of hundreds of thousands of violent deaths (Burnham et al. 2006). The war in Iraq continues to receive extensive news coverage.

Compare this with another Iraq issue. After the first Gulf war, in 1991, until the 2003 invasion, Iraq was subject to UN sanctions, which were imposed with ruthlessness: so-called dual use technologies were banned, so it was impossible to import adequate equipment for health care and water purification. The result was a healthcare infrastructure collapse and rampant disease. The death toll has been estimated as one or two million people. Some commentators have called this genocide (Arnove 2000; Graham-Brown 1999; Simons 1998; Sponeck 2006).

There are a number of reasons why the enormous toll from sanctions received very little public attention compared to the invasion. Sanctions were widely seen as fair: they were endorsed by the UN, whereas the invasion was not. Among the factors, the gradual nature of sanctions-induced death was undoubtedly significant. There was no shock and awe and no suicide bombings, but rather individual deaths in homes and hospitals.

Oil spills can generate enormous publicity and cause public concern because of the impact on ecosystems. The most famous oil spill was from the supertanker Exxon Valdez on 24 March 1989, which released over 10 millions gallons of crude oil off the Alaskan coast. The media coverage was intensive

for months; many people blamed Exxon for the accident (Davidson 1990; Keeble 1991).

There have been other spills releasing greater amounts of oil, of which the largest was over 250 million gallons in the Persian Gulf during the 1991 war. When, where and in what context the oil is spilled make a big difference to the response.

It so happens there was a slow oil spill directly comparable to the Exxon Valdez spill. In Guadalupe Dunes, on the California coast between Los Angeles and San Francisco, between 8 and 20 million gallons of oil have been spilled. This is a similar magnitude to the Exxon Valdez and also occurred in the United States, but with one major difference: the Guadalupe Dunes spill was slow rather than sudden, taking place over a period of nearly four decades. Thomas Beamish (2002), who has studied this spill in depth, attributes its neglect to a process of accommodation — psychological, organisational and social — that allows problems to persist because there is no dramatic disruption of routines. He calls slowly occurring problems like this 'crescive troubles' and considers them to be the most serious challenge facing humans.

Indirect Comparisons

There are innumerable less direct comparisons between social problems that suggest that slow problems are less likely to receive comparable attention to sudden, dramatic ones.

Aeroplane crashes generate news coverage, often across the world, especially when many people are killed. The deaths and injuries from driving are dispersed, mostly one or a few at a time. Traffic accidents are dispersed rather than slow, but from the point of view of a particular location the death toll appears to increase slowly.

The most prominent nuclear accident was at Chernobyl, in the Ukraine, in 1986. The immediate death toll was modest — less than 50 — while the subsequent number of deaths from radiation exposure is a matter of dispute, ranging from few up to tens of thousands. The Chernobyl accident received saturation media coverage. The risk of nuclear accidents remains a significant factor in the resistance to nuclear power.

The most common way to produce electricity, rather than nuclear power, is to burn coal. This has major environmental and health consequences, including contributions to acid rain, greenhouse gases and respiratory disease, not to mention impacts on the health of coal miners. As proponents of nuclear power eagerly point out, coal contains a low level of radioactivity, and the burning of coal may contribute more to human exposure to radioactivity than do routine emissions from nuclear power plants. Yet

coal burning does not generate the same dread as nuclear power. One reason is that coal-fired stations are not at risk of any sudden accident equivalent to a nuclear meltdown. Environmentalists, who typically advocate energy efficiency and renewable energy sources as alternatives to both coal and nuclear power, have given far more attention to the hazards of nuclear power than to those of coal.

Wars often generate a lot of attention. Arms production often does not, especially when the arms are ordinary. The production and trade in small arms is enormous but is seldom the subject of protests or feature stories. There are many deaths from pistols, rifles and machine guns in numerous conflicts around the globe but because the deaths are just a few at a time and there are no large explosions, they receive relatively little attention.

In 2004, a huge tsunami hit Asian countries, killing over 200,000 people. This generated news headlines around the world and led to a massive outpouring of sympathy and aid. Many of those killed were poor people. But poor people are at risk daily from disease, in many cases aggravated by malnutrition. The phenomenon of poverty is a slow injustice. There is no dramatic event that highlights its immense toll.

Automobile accidents, coal burning, small arms and poverty are examples of how major social impacts can receive relatively little attention. Slowness seems to be one of the factors contributing to the invisibility of each of these issues.

Success Stories

What can be done to raise the profile of slow injustices? Insight can be gained by looking at issues that are slow yet have been brought to the forefront of public awareness.

No one drops dead from smoking a single cigarette. Whereas heroin overdoses can kill and alcohol is an immediate contributor to fights and accidents, cigarettes have no such immediate consequences. The link between smoking and subsequent ill health is not obvious; epidemiological studies were needed to demonstrate it. Smoking is the epitome of a slowly-acting social problem. Yet, unlike many other slow injustices, in quite a few countries it has been turned into a highly salient problem, though this has required decades of campaigning.

How has this been done? Scientists have studied the effects of smoking, producing ever more convincing proof of health hazards to smokers and others exposed to smoke. Campaigners — including doctors, community activists and health promotion units — have seized on the findings to challenge the social acceptability of smoking. Concerned members

of the public have contributed through peer pressure, for example asking guests not to smoke. These efforts coincided with more people taking responsibility for their personal health, including physical fitness, good diet and clean air. Governments and businesses, in response to pressure and changing attitudes, have put increasing restrictions on smokers, banning smoking in aeroplanes, theatres, offices and even some open spaces (Chapman 2007; Reid 2004; Troyer & Markle 1993; Tyrrell 1999).

The key argument in campaigning is health consequences. These are sometimes made vivid with images of blackened lungs or cowboys, in the style of the Marlboro Man, on respirators with late-stage lung cancer. But there seems to have been no direct method for compensating for the slowness of smoking's effects. Instead, various other approaches are made to compensate for lack of immediacy, such as health statistics, costs, addiction and effects on non-smokers.

Another slow injustice is land mines. Once laid, they claim a toll of victims over months, years and decades. Most commonly just one person is maimed or killed at a time: there are no massacres. Seldom are cameras present.

Despite the slowness, campaigners — notably through the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, a loose coalition of non-government organisations established in 1992 — were able to make anti-personnel mines a top priority issue by emphasising horrific human suffering from an indiscriminate weapon that may be triggered years after war is over. Images of children missing legs due to land mines are moving.

Global warming is a slow injustice. The largest impacts will be decades hence, with many of those suffering the consequences yet to be born. Unlike tsunamis, there are no sudden catastrophes from an increase in average temperature. Studies suggest an increase in the frequency of extreme weather events, but for any given cyclone or drought, there is no easy way to determine whether global warming played a part in its development. The connection between human activity and social impacts is not obvious to the eye, but has to be deduced from climate modelling.

For decades, environmentalists have warned about the cumulative effects of burning fossil fuels. That temperatures seemed to be hotter from the late 1990s onwards — and were reported as hotter — has helped people take climate change seriously. In the past few years, helped along by authoritative scientific reports and the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, featuring Al Gore, global warming has become environmental issue number 1.

An Inconvenient Truth contains some dramatic

visualisations of what would happen to low-lying areas, like Bangladesh, should sea levels rise significantly. These speed up the process for viewers, compensating for the slowness of the change. But such time-lapse scenarios seem not to have played a key role in the increase in public awareness. So far as images are concerned, probably more important have been pictures of higher seas, snow-free mountains and bereft polar bears. These are images of consequences rather than process.

Conclusion

Sudden events capture attention, whereas changes that develop slowly may hardly be noticed. The potential risk from gradual changes is highlighted in the parable of the boiling frog: it is said that a frog dropped into boiling water will jump out immediately, whereas a frog sitting in water that is gradually brought to a boil will not attempt to leave, and will die. The message is to become aware of slowly encroaching problems.

The difficulties of recognising and responding to slow injustice seem borne out by the examples of Iraq under sanctions and the Guadalupe Dunes oil spill, slowly evolving disasters which received minimal attention compared to the Iraq war and the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Slowness also seems to be a factor in the neglect of social problems like poverty, cars, coal burning and small arms production.

Despite the difficulties in raising awareness about slow injustices, there are examples showing what can be achieved. In the cases of smoking, land mines and global warming, dedicated campaigners have overcome the disadvantages of slowness by using a range of other methods: statistics, statements by experts, images of the individual and social consequences, appeals to a sense of fairness, arguments about costs, descriptions of alternatives and presentation of strategies for change. Smoking, land mines and global warming remain serious problems, to be sure, but campaigners have made significant progress just in putting these issues on the agenda, which hasn't occurred with many other slow injustices. The key point here is that campaigners on these issues, to whatever degree they have succeeded, have seldom tried to turn a slow injustice into a sudden, dramatic event, but instead have used a wide range of other ways to bring the issue into people's consciousness.

For the purpose of raising concern, nearly every issue has shortcomings. As illustrated in Table 1, labelling, closeness, timing and other factors play a big role in whether an issue receives attention. The lesson from this examination of speed is that weakness in one factor — namely, slowness — can be compensated by strength in other factors,

such as endorsements. Generalising, this suggests that campaigners, rather than putting a lot of effort into shoring up weak aspects of their case, should instead concentrate on emphasising the strongest parts.

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Slaughter Circle

The scent of death
lingers for years
in a place

lodges in the soil
rots
and slowly compresses;
composting down
in dirt;

and the earth turns
and the seasons pass
time and space
and silence

until the coiling roots
suck it up again
and all that grows

from Baby's Tears
to blood red poppies
Oaks and elms

bear testimony
to the forgotten dead.

M.L. Emmett, Norwood SA