

**Keith Doubt.**

**Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia.**

Fordham University Press, 2006, 184 pp.  
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*Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia* is a bad book, but in an important way.

The book is a series of short essays on the “ethnic cleansing” (Doubt rightly decries the euphemism of the term) in Bosnia during the 1992-95 civil war. The essays each stand on their own, and several have been published before, but they flow together well nonetheless. Doubt is a skilled writer with a talent for pithy, resonant formulations, and the various essays are threaded together by Doubt’s interpretation of the ethnic cleansing as sociocide — “the murder of society” or “the murder of the social” (p. 126). Doubt provides some intriguing insights into the mechanisms of genocide, especially in the first half of the book, but the main argument begins poorly and gets worse as it goes along; by the end, *Understanding Evil* does not so much understand evil as condemn it — and condemns understanding as complicity.

Doubt’s analysis is strongest when he draws from the sociological tradition to illuminate how genocide corroded the basic institutions of Bosnian society. He argues that the latent function of genocide in Bosnia was to bind the perpetrators in a solidarity based on collective guilt, and that the violence was as vicious as it was because of the “long-standing history of tolerance and openness in Bosnia” that stood in the way of the nationalist’s agenda (10). He observes that, contrary to the media portrayals, Sarajevo under siege “did not digress into a presocial state” of Hobbesian anarchy, and that a normative order characterized by duty and community persisted among the victims (18). His observations on the semiotics of the perpetrators’ atrocities, their ability to enroll the world media and its audience as unwitting accomplices to atrocity (53-58) open interesting lines of investigation, as do his observations on the importance of scapegoating both in the genocidal process and in the international legal process that aims at justice (101-103). Building on Jonathan Schell’s claim that “evil becomes radical when it ... mutilates or destroy [a] world” (21), Doubt explores how the Serbian nationalists attacked the social institutions that make meaningful action possible — funerals, homes, family relationships. This analysis gives a wider sociological importance to acts that are too often treated as marginal to our discipline.

These potential contributions are undermined by Doubt’s refusal to examine the structural preconditions of the genocide or the motivations of the perpetrators — indeed, his refusal that anyone should conduct such an examination. The book opens with Socrates’s claim that “no one knowingly does wrong” and that doing wrong “is a matter of not knowing what is right and nothing more”, and with Aristotle’s supporting argument that, because every action aims at some good, “the good” is that to which all things aim (3). Where Weber, for example, would bracket away any metaphysical notion of good and inquire empirically into what goals motivate the perpetrators of genocide, Doubt prefers to affirm that evil is “thought-defying” (110) and that evil is not action (113, 115) because it does not seek some good. A sociology of action is therefore inapplicable to evil. Doubt repeats uncritically the Socratic claim that, because all people will to do good, the person who does evil is actually powerless because they do not do as they will (107-109); this position implies that Milosevic was powerless, and that an analysis of power relations will not help to explain the genocide. At the climax of the book, Doubt condemns any robust sociological understanding of evil as a form of complicity with evil:

No utilitarian calculus can interpret these deeds as aiming toward some good. Metaphysically, it is a mistake to treat these crimes against humanity as anything except banal. To do more, to inflate the rationality of the events as if the actors were seeking some good, is to be co-opted by evil (123).

In the wake of such a statement there can be no understanding, only the self-congratulation of the virtuous.

Doubt wants to deny that anyone can profit from evil; at times he also denies that evil can actually happen. Sociocide can never really succeed, he claims, because society has a nonempirical character that cannot be killed (22). Even the Beothuks, annihilated by European colonization, are not really gone because they survive metaphysically “through the mere saying of their name and the telling of their story” (135). At times Doubt denies events he has just analyzed: his comments on the importance of scapegoating to ethnic cleansing and to international legal processes are followed by the claim that “what is, in fact, unanimous is the taboo against scapegoating, and this unanimity is metaphysical as well as empirical” (105). He claims that the “wanted” posters of Radovan Karadzic make Karadzic unkillable because “if we see another’s face, we cannot kill the other” (115). Doubt even affirms that suffering of the victims of genocide is not greater than the suffering of the perpetrators:

It is hard to imagine a pain greater than not being brought to justice for planning and ordering the rapes and murders of hundreds of thousands of human beings who were neighbors, friends, and relatives (77).

This tendency is at its worst when Doubt discusses a situation common during the civil war, when Serbian gunmen would break into private homes and threaten to rape and murder the daughter of the family if the father did not rape her himself (26). Doubt applies Garfinkel’s notion of the “degradation ceremony” to this scenario. But Garfinkel’s theory states that, for a degradation ceremony to succeed, the perpetrator must find a witness with whom he shares “fundamental values” and show that the victim “chose to be estranged” from those values (30-31). Because the fathers in these scenarios presumably acted out of dedication to their role as fathers, which involved putting their daughter’s life ahead of personal repugnance, the conditions of a degradation ceremony do not apply. Rather than infer that Garfinkel’s concept of a degradation ceremony does not fully grasp what takes place in such situation, Doubt concludes that the degradation ceremony fails and the fathers are not degraded for having “intercourse” with their daughters. About the daughters, he says nothing at all.

*Understanding Evil* also suffers from questionable or faulty scholarship on a number of points. The term “sociocide” has been in use at least since Johan Galtung’s 1982 book *Environment, Development, and Military Activity: Towards Alternative Security Doctrines* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget); Doubt neglects to cite any precedent uses and describes the term as a “neologism”, as if he were claiming its authorship. Alfred Schutz is referred to as “Alfred Schultz”, both in the text and in the bibliography. At the start of Chapter 8, “Postmodernism’s Relation to Evil”, Doubt treats postmodernism as a unified theoretical position “founded” by Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard (65). He then proceeds to claim that, in *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*, “Peter Handke speaks about evil from a postmodern perspective” (65); the chapter is a polemic against Handke’s “postmodernist” analysis. But although Doubt reveals Handke’s book as an exercise in xenophobic nationalist myth-making, he does not link it to any postmodernist literature or themes at all. The insinuation that postmodernism is responsible for the atrocities in Bosnia also appears when Doubt claims that Milosevic’s ignoble conduct resulted from the absence of

metaphysical considerations in his thinking (50).

Most egregiously, Doubt (126) cites as belonging to Tom Cushman and Stjepan Mestrovic's 1996 book *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia* what was actually (and famously) the opening paragraph of Chapter IX, "Genocide", of *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, the 1944 book in which Raphael Lemkin first coined the term "genocide"; in *This Time We Knew*, the passage that Doubt cites appears as a block quotation preceded by the correct attribution.

Overall, Doubt wants to show that "the problem of social order cannot be resolved without reference to human rights" (105). This optimistic statement belies the history of successful genocides — in Turkey, Australia, throughout the Americas, and other places where genocide informed the constitution of a new and enduring social order. In the face of radical evil, we who yearn for a world that respects human rights need something more than denial to fuel the engine of our struggle. In *When Victims Become Killers* (Princeton University Press, 2001), Mahmood Mamdani speaks appositely of the different ways that social science can discuss evil:

One could go on narrating atrocity stories ad infinitum, and indeed some have. The point of such an exercise may be to show how base human nature can be, or it may be, I fear, more self-serving: to show how base is the nature of some humans, usually some others, not us. This is not my purpose, nor do I wish to shut my eyes to atrocity when atrocities have indeed been perpetrated. My point, though, is that atrocity cannot be its own explanation. Violence cannot be allowed to speak for itself, for violence is not its own meaning. To be made thinkable, it needs to be *historicized*.

Social scientists have the unusual privilege of regarding atrocity from a distance; we are free to balance our emotional and moral engagement with a measure of detachment that lets us put unique experiences in a wider perspective. I think our very moral engagement obliges us to this detachment. The world does not need more books like *Understanding Evil*, books that succumb to the panicked impulse to push evil as far from ourselves as possible. It needs books with the courage to face evil calmly and implacably, to understand its atrocious functionality and its fatal rationality. Such labour robs evil acts of their hypnotic, all-encompassing quality, and at best it increases — however incrementally — the freedom of thought and action of those affected by violence, the freedom to pursue the means by which violence may be ended.

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