

Author's Response to Christopher Powell's Review of *Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia*

While *Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia* is a theoretical work, it is guided by a pragmatic interest—How do we resist evil? How do we break its hypnotic spell? Christopher Powell and I have a strong interest in answering this pressing question from a sociological perspective. I offer an unusual argument, which Powell understands but rejects. I argue that if evil were social action, its rational goal would be sociocide, the killing of the social as well as the society that sustains it. Such a phenomenon, of course, would be problematic for sociology if only because it raises the question, “What does sociology study?”. If evil would succeed, sociology would then lose its *raison d'être*. I argue that, as a goal of action, sociocide is unintelligible, and for this reason evil, as Hannah Arendt says, is “thought-defying.” I recognize that evil exists, and I formulate the consequences of evil as sociocide, providing stark examples from the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I argue, however, that although popular culture and academic discussions would have us think otherwise, evil does not exist as action. Evil is its empty shell. I agree with the theologian, Martin Buber, when he says, “Evil is lack of direction, and that which is done by it and out of it is the grasping, seizing, devouring, compelling, seducing, exploiting, humiliating, torturing, and destroying of what offers itself” (quoted in *Understanding Evil*, p. 8). I disagree with the sociologist, Thomas Cushman, when he says, “At base, evil is action” (quoted in *Understanding Evil*, p. 111). How, then, do we resist evil? I argue that when we understand action as a positive force as articulated in the works of Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, Kenneth Burke, and Talcott Parsons, we understand that evil cannot be action. Whenever we are seduced into believing that evil is action, it becomes impossible to resist. We fear it and treat it as more than it is. Members of the United States Congress will not impeach George W. Bush and Dick Cheney; Bush and Cheney are seen as strong and clever political actors, even as they engage in sociocide not only in Iraq but also in the United States. If it were recognized that Bush and Cheney, given their banalities, were very weak political actors, it would be not only strikingly easy but also morally imperative to impeach Bush and Cheney immediately. Impeachment would be a notable and historical collective social action within a political and moral context.

Powell has a keen understanding of the issue, but his interpretation misconstrues my argument. Powell writes, “*Understanding Evil* is [*sic*] does not so much understand evil as condemn it – and condemns understanding as complicity.” It is true, I condemn a certain understanding of evil. In *The Structure of Social Action* Talcott Parsons calls and critiques this understanding as the positivistic utilitarian understanding, which dominates much of sociology and intellectual culture. I write, for example the following.

If the war crimes in Brčko, Foča, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Zvornik, and uncountable other places in Bosnia-Herzegovina were actions, toward what good did they aim? 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. (*Understanding Evil*, p. 123)

Powell thus criticizes my unwillingness to inquire empirically into what goals motivate perpetrators of genocide. While I acknowledge power, dominance, and glory as goals that can motivate perpetrators of genocide, I argue that evil itself cannot be a goal that motivates perpetrators of genocide. Powell's interesting citations to the work of Mahmood Mamdani in his review of my book

help support this point. Mamdani says that “atrociousness cannot be its own explanation.” To transpose the point, evil cannot be its own explanation. Why? Because evil cannot be its own end. Evil cannot be a motive because a motive seeks some end as good from the viewpoint of the actor, even if dementedly conceived. Perpetrators of genocide may see evil or the appearance of evil as a means to an end, say, the creation of a greater Serbia, but perpetrators of genocide do not see evil itself, that is, sociocide, as the end. Here is why Socrates refuses to theorize evil, despite the taunting of Thrasymachus in *Republic* and Polus and Callicles in *Gorgias*.

The notion of radical evil, of course, asserts that evil is its own end and evil indeed can be action. I argue that the notion is wrong-headed. Mamdani, for example, continues, “for violence is not its own meaning.” The same argument can be made for evil, for evil is not its own meaning. Evil’s meaning is parasitic; its host is the social.

Mamdani then says, “To be made thinkable, it needs to be historicized.” It is helpful to provide an analytical reading of this statement even if it might fall outside the parameters that Mamdani sets for his own work. Mamdani says that social scientific accounts of atrocities, violence, and evil must in some sense be hypothetical, that is, Weberian ideal types, empirically as well as metaphysically contrived. I argue that a bogus and dangerous ideal type for understanding evil in society is to see evil as action. The ideal type does not help us grasp the reality of the phenomenon we seek to understand. For Parsons, the ontology for the use of ideal types in sociological inquiry is necessarily non-metaphysical; for Weber, however, the ontology is somewhere between empiricism and metaphysics, somewhere in no-man’s land. While Mamdani might not agree with this reading, he would at least hear how it could be generated from his statement.

Powell is indeed correct when he says that I deny that anyone can profit from evil. The moral notion is developed dramatically in the Platonic dialogues. To profit from something is to gain from it, to gain something positive, something good. If evil is seen as a profit, the actor is doing something not for the sake of evil but for the sake of evil’s profit. Evil cannot be its own profit. To assert that evil is its own profit is banal. I take this matter as far as I can when I write in my book:

To resolve the contradiction of this polemic, we could say that evil represents the good of not aspiring toward the good. For evil, the way to seek good is not to seek good, and this aim becomes an end-in-itself. Once evil, however, aims at some good, even the good of not aiming toward the good, evil is not longer evil. Evil loses itself with the will to seek good, albeit in a contradictory way. (*Understanding Evil*, p. 111)

Can we resist evil without condemning it? What is a non-condemning understanding of evil? When one understands evil as action, one must adapt the ethical ontology that Weber calls “the ethical irrationality of the world.” René Girard’s influential account of scapegoating both recognizes and accepts the ethical irrationality of the world. Girard argues that scapegoating is inevitable and necessary to the creation of social order. I resist Girard’s position. I ask “what makes scapegoating right?” Nothing, nothing except the ethical irrationality of the world. No ethic of conviction, no moral principle, makes scapegoating right from the viewpoint of either the scapegoat or society. Scapegoating is “ethically responsible” only because it occurs at the collective level for instrumental reasons. Scapegoating can never be ethically committed. A scapegoating ritual is not only gripped but also panicked by the ethical irrationality of the world and deals with it by perpetuating it. Scapegoating reduces a society to a crowd.

It is true. I was unfamiliar with the use of the term “sociocide” in Johan Galtung’s *Environment, Development, and Military Activity: Towards Alternative Security Doctrines*, published in Norway and written for a military audience. Galtung coins other terms as well, for example, ecocide and omnicide, and he does not formulate the explanatory significance of sociocide with respect to evil. The point here is not one of ownership. I want to formulate what sociocide is as an explanatory concept of evil. I develop the concept to redress what George Lakoff would call the hypocognition in scholarly discussions of evil. We have difficulty understanding what we see when we see evil because we lack language to frame the phenomenon we see. I propose the concept of sociocide, not as my own, but as a meaningfully adequate explanation with which to resolve the hypocognition in contemporary discussions of evil.

Powell is correct when he says that I do not provide “a unified theoretical position” from which to account for Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, something these thinkers would say is undesirable; I instead limit myself to treating the writing of Peter Handke as an exemplar of a postmodern relation to evil and the implications of this relation. I do not say that postmodernism is responsible for war crimes; I say that postmodernism helps account for the dysfunctional ethos that sustains and protects the perpetrators of war crimes within a community. What social ethos sustains the failure to arrest Radovan Karadic and Ratko Mladic? As Handke himself recommends, consider the most recent films of Emir Kusturica.

Powell notes that my book “believes the history of successful genocides—Turkey, Australia, throughout the Americas, and other places where genocide informed the constitution of a new and enduring social order.” What is a successful genocide? Is genocide an efficient means to a social end? Drawing upon Émile Durkheim, I argue that no state can maintain a true solidarity within its society while thinking genocide is an acceptable and effective tool for achieving its political ends. It is useful to demonstrate the argument with contemporary events. The recent decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) or World Court to not hold Serbia responsible or accountable for the genocide that occurred in Bosnia-Herzegovina does a disservice to Serbia; it is in Serbia’s interest to make itself right with a people and country grotesquely violated. Turkey today struggles with this same issue; Turkey objects to other states using the term genocide to describe the deaths of one million Armenians in its country. Even if historically true, Turkey does not want genocide to be used as a term to describe a murderous past as a means to establish a new and enduring social order. The event confounds the social cohesion of Turkey. Likewise, the tragic history of the Beothuks troubles the collective memory of Newfoundlanders.

Powell thus correctly points out that “Doubt wants to show that ‘the problem of social order cannot be resolved without reference to human rights’” and calls my position optimistic. To demonstrate the strength of my position, let me close by analyzing the recent World Court decision, not from a legal or historical point of view but from a sociological point of view. It could be argued that it was not realistic to expect the World Court to find and hold Serbia responsible for planning, initiating, and carrying out genocide in Bosnia. The hope was naïve. Throughout history other countries have been guilty of the same crime. To single out Serbia in this way would have been hypocritical. Serbia would see itself as a scapegoat for the international community, and this would just make matters worse. What Serbia did in Bosnia-Herzegovina was no different from what other countries have done and will do throughout history.

To resist this political realism and moral indifference, it should be noted that the World Court had a historical opportunity here to establish a legal principle to which not only Serbia but also all countries would be morally accountable. If Serbia had been found guilty and held responsible for the

horrific consequences of genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a precedent would have been set. Other countries would have had to think twice about the consequences of being directly responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Iraq would have had a better chance of suing United States for crimes against humanity inflicted in its country; Lebanon would have had a better chance of suing the state of Israel for war crimes during its attacks in Lebanon; and Chechnya would have had a better chance of suing Russia for atrocities inflicted against its people. It is said that the decision of the World Court irreparably damaged Bosnia because the decision cements the cynical perception of the international community obstructing Bosnia-Herzegovina's need for justice to rebuild a stable and unified society. The decision also irreparably damages world order, of which Serbia, too, is a truly desperate part. Serbia was denied the opportunity to answer for its war crimes. Since the international community was in many ways an accomplice of Serbia; it, too, is guilty and protecting itself behind this decision.

The tragedy is that Serbia and other states will continue to live under the illusion that it is advantageous to commit gross injustices at the collective level and to do so with impunity. Injustices at the collective level will be seen as rational and functional; the benefits of genocide will be seen to outweigh the costs. No individual in the world sees this position as moral, but some see it as a principle of greatness. The World Court did little to cure this ignorance that infects the world today. To the disadvantage of Serbia and every state in the world, the World Court paid homage to this principle of greatness. An endorsement for value-free inquiry into genocide will never provide a basis from which to resist the World Court decision. I wrote *Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia* in an effort to overcome this conundrum. The concept of sociocide helps resolve the problem of hypocognition in sociological discussions of evil.

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