

Understanding Evil II: Reply to Christopher Powell

Christopher Powell's rejoinder to my response to his review of *Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia* (Doubt 2006) raises important matters regarding the inquiry of sociology into crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide. Our understanding of these matters differs, but we zero in on the same sociologists and polemics that animate modern sociology.

There is no place in the world where evil does not occur. Bosnia is not unique. Bosnia, however, is unique in how the problem of evil appeared so clearly to the world. Despite evil's transparency, evil was neither comprehended nor adequately resisted. This context provoked the writing of *Understanding Evil* because in several ways the war in Bosnia defied sociological explanation. In both theory and reality, the Hobbesian jungle is so nasty and so brutish and human life so painful and so short that in response to this horrid situation human beings with their capacity for reason establish peace through a social contract that prohibits the use of force and fraud. For Thomas Hobbes and most sociologists, the foundation for such a social contract is empirical and not metaphysical. The social contract serves individuals' self interest collectively and thus effectively, and herein lies its stability. In Bosnia, despite the extreme horrors of the war, no social contract could take hold. Even today, the Dayton Peace Accords could be characterized as a dysfunctional social contract: its content not only fails, it perverts a viable sense of social and civic order in a modern state.

As I said elsewhere, Bosnia humbles sociology (Doubt 2000). Sociology cannot colonize Bosnia with its science and empirical reasoning. Bosnia thus compels sociology to re-think its discipline, its methodologies and its theories, if sociology is to provide meaningfully adequate accounts of events during the war in Bosnia. *Understanding Evil* develops the concept of "sociocide" in an effort to account for the subject of evil and in an effort to make sociology stronger. Powell is correct. I am an apostate, and Powell sanctions the heresies in my essentialism. My response is to point out that there is essentialism even in the position of anti-essentialism. Friedrich Nietzsche writes, "It always remains a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests — even we devotees of knowledge today, we godless ones and anti-metaphysicans, still take our fire too from the flame which a faith thousand of years old has kindled: that Christian faith, which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth, that truth is divine" (2008: 166). While Nietzsche perhaps states it too emphatically, his point still stands: there is a significant degree of essentialism embedded in the stand of anti-essentialism.

Let me review and re-count the project of *Understanding Evil* from within the framework of empirical inquiry. The book's question is whether evil is action. The null hypothesis is that evil is not action. There is no significant relation between evil and action. While evil exists, it does not exist as action. The alternative hypothesis is that evil is action. There is a significant relation between evil and action. The concept of radical evil is that evil takes the form of action and becomes powerful. The hypothesis most likely to be accepted as being true in popular culture and academic discourse is not the null hypothesis, but the alternative hypothesis.

One variable here is action. Talcott Parsons (1968) and Kenneth Burke (1989) explain clearly what action is, and this literature structures *Understanding Evil*. Action involves an agent, an end, a means, a set of conditions, and, importantly for sociologists, a normative orientation. An actor rationally or irrationally makes choices among available means and ends in correspondence with a normative orientation. The actor's motive is non-random, as Parsons says, in that it is governed by a value element. The task of sociological inquiry is to account for each element in the action frame of

reference, their interrelationship, and their symbiosis. Parsons (1968) calls the approach analytical realism.

Understanding Evil therefore tests the alternative hypothesis that evil has a significant relation to action. To prove the alternative hypothesis, it is necessary to explain how evil correlates not with only one but with every element in the action frame of reference. I argue, for example, that if evil were action, its goal would be sociocide, the killing of society. *Understanding Evil* tests the alternative hypothesis, not with experimental research, but with reason and theory as it is found in the rhetorical methodology that Kenneth Burke calls, “perspective by incongruity.” “It is neither wholly euphemistic, nor wholly debunking — hence it provides the *charitable* attitude toward people that is required for purposes of persuasion and co-operation, but at the same time maintains our shrewdness concerning the simplicities of ‘cashing in’” (Burke 1989:261). Burke is not a sociologist, but he significantly influenced the work of C. W. Mills, Talcott Parsons, Erving Goffman, and Harold Garfinkel (Doubt 1997). To use the awkward language of inferential statistics, the study fails to reject the null hypothesis. *Understanding Evil* finds a significant non-relation between evil and action. This result is based on a mixture of reason and faith, that is, a mixture of non-essentialist evidence and essentialist convictions.

Powell finds this conclusion non-sociological. He accuses the study of a Type II error, that is, failing to reject the null hypothesis when it is false. He characterizes the conclusion as harmful, deleterious, and “an egocentric projection of the author’s own values into the natural universe” (Powell 2007). Powell’s damning charge, however, comes with the territory. Max Weber explains the inevitability of the charge for every sociologist who uses ideal types to engage in the interpretative understanding of the subjective meaning of action. Weber writes, “It is a monstrous misunderstanding to think that an ‘individualistic’ *method* should involve what is in any conceivable sense an individualistic system of values” (1947:107). Weber provides sociologists with a loophole. Powell is correct in saying that the approach in *Understanding Evil* reflects an individualistic method, but he misunderstands when he concludes that its approach therefore involves an individualistic system of values.

Powell’s charge implicitly raises the question of what is the subject of sociology. How independent of the natural universe is sociology’s subject? If there is no subject independent of the natural universe, is there such a thing as sociology? With great inspiration, Weber answers this question: “We [sociologists] can accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals” (1947:103). The problem becomes how do sociologists explain “the subjective meaning of the action of the component individuals” (Weber 1947:102) with validity and reliability? Is it possible? It is a conundrum that vexes Weber greatly.

Burke and Parsons are not the only theorists who stress action’s centrality. Hannah Arendt does, and it is useful to re-state *Understanding Evil*’s conclusion through Arendt’s writing. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt distinguishes action from labor and work. Unlike labor or work, action means “to take an initiative, to begin ... to set something in motion. ... This beginning is not the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody” (1958:177). While conventional sociology, like psychology, can explain behavior causally, it nevertheless does so without knowing the subject’s end, motivation, or guiding normative orientation. Conventional sociology reduces action to behavior. It is not possible, however, to explain action without referencing the subject’s end, motivation, or guiding normative orientation, and these matters are difficult to account for. If action, however, were not the subject sociology examines, what would sociology study?

Parsons (1968) writes concertedly against the reductionism in the positivistic-utilitarian theory of social action. In the same vein, Arendt argues that action cannot be reduced to labor or work. Action is something different, something more. “Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others... This happens whenever human togetherness is lost” (Arendt 1958:180). The bedrock of human life is social action. Vitality, enrichment, conviction, compassion, and enlightenment are upshots of action.

In light of Arendt’s work, it is easy to see that labor can be evil (labor is forced). Humans are conscripted into evil events and manipulated to do evil deeds. It is easy to see that work can be evil (work is prompted by utility). Powell cites numerous examples of the “work” of genocide, its utility and its fabrication, throughout social history.

Can action, though, be evil? This is the question in *Understanding Evil*. Action requires the choice of someone who takes an initiative not as something, but as someone. Can an actor choose to take an initiative knowing that it is evil? Evil appears in labor. Evil appears in work, but does evil appear in the action frame of reference as formulated by Arendt, Parsons, and Burke? Arendt herself steps outside the progressive empirical epistemology of Parsons and Burke and indicates that it cannot. “Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries” (1958:190). If the end of action were sociocide (as it is with evil), action would not establish relationships, except the relationship of randomness, which is found in the natural universe. Can evil then be action given Arendt’s account of what action is? Evil results in the loss of human togetherness; social action takes for granted, sustains, and develops human togetherness.

War criminals like Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić, who thirteen years after the end of the war in Bosnia remain unapprehended, made evil and carried out genocide. They fabricated evil’s consequences. Did they, however, act evilly? Would Mladić and Karadžić as social agents blush if put on trial? Would they exemplify moral self-consciousness? Despite my efforts to prove the alternative hypothesis with both reason and theory, in the end I fail to reject the null hypothesis. I find that there is a non-significant relation between evil and action. While evil simulates action, that is, the form of action, it cannot assume the substance of action. Susan Neiman (2002:271-73) formulates the same idea as non-intentional agency. Is there ever agency, however, without intention? The notion of non-intentional agency is oxymoronic. Despite what popular culture and academic discourse imagine, evil cannot represent the beginning of someone. If, in contrast, we accept the alternative hypothesis (a Type I error which rejects the null hypothesis when it is true), we make evil greater than it is. We do for evil what evil cannot do for itself, and evil is grateful.

Understanding Evil proposes a pragmatic way to resist evil. The political problem in Bosnia was that with great labor and much work the international community and United Nations resisted what it interpreted as the “action” of evil, namely, ethnic cleansing. The relation, however, needed to be inverted. The international community needed to “act” against the “labor” and “work” of evil, a task that would not have been difficult if it had been recognized that evil itself is not action.

The project of *Understanding Evil* does not to explain whether evil exists in the natural world. It does. The project examines whether evil can be interpreted as the subjective meaning of social action. I fail to differ from the Socratic position: human beings cannot knowingly act evilly where the emphasis is on “act” as opposed to “labor” or “work.” Powell is correct when he characterizes this position as essentialist. The essentialist position, however, is not necessarily non-empirical, and Parsons understood this paradox while remaining an empiricist.

There is a misleading historical point in Powell's rejoinder. Powell writes, "Doubt opines about the 'ghosts' of the Beothuk, but genocides of indigenous peoples would not trouble the collective conscience of Canadian settler society, if the survivors had not found the strength to make their voices heard amidst the triumphalist din of the colonizers" (2007). I understand and appreciate Powell's point. In this context, however, there is an inconvenient fact (Weber 1946:147). There were no survivors from the Beothuk community. Ingeborg Marshall's *The History and Ethnography of the Beothuk* (1996) documents how Shanawdithit was the last survivor. Shortly after her capture, she died in 1829 in St. John's, Newfoundland. Some members of the Beothuk community may have blended with their enemies in the Micmac community, but this is a matter of speculation. The material culture, which still remains in Newfoundland, and the record of Shanawdithit's captivity bear witness to the extinction of the Beothuk community. My work suggests that the genocide was partly sociocidal: it left a permanent scar on the living memory of the Newfoundland community.

In his rejoinder Powell references David Campbell's review of *Sociology after Bosnia and Kosovo: Recovering Justice* (Doubt 2000). As Powell points out, both he and Campbell accuse me of being exegetically irresponsible in my discussion of postmodernism; they suggest I have a bias against postmodernism which makes me nonobjective, if not unethical. Campbell writes in his review of my earlier book, "All the intellectual care and attention evident in the rest of the book is seemingly considered superfluous when one comes to the theoretical tradition that is 'other'" (2001:1199). Their shared criticism raises the question of what is exegetical responsibility. Exegesis, the hegemonic practice of the seminary for the study of scripture, is a matter of intellectual labor in compliance with the denotative meaning of a sacred text. Exegesis is a matter of scholarly work with dutiful adherence to the historical parameters that give meaning to a text. The end is respect for the accessibility and honor of a text. A distinguishing feature of postmodern discourse, however, is its transgressive relation to conventional modes of reading and classical approaches to interpretation. The liberating character of postmodernism is that it insists that scholarly interpretation be a matter of action rather than a matter of labor or work. In postmodernism, interpretation takes an initiative that represents the beginning of not something, but someone.

Peter Handke, for example, acted. As discussed in *Understanding Evil*, Handke traveled to Serbia to bear witness to its people and account authentically for the subjective meaning of the Serbian people as social actors. Handke's initiative was timely, compelling, and, importantly for me, sociological. My analysis begins with the positivity of Handke's initiative. I then argue that Handke's readings are confined by a postmodern ethos that is anti-Platonic. Handke's pedagogy is to demonstrate that there is no foundation for privileged speaking vis-à-vis another on the subject of violence in the Balkans; his pedagogy represents a principle of postmodern thought. The problem I explicate is that in denying any foundation for privileged speaking, one nevertheless defaults to a privileged speaking position. The most privileged speaking position becomes the postmodern privilege of denying any foundation for privileged speaking. The problem is not overcome. The polemic echoes conversations between Socrates and different interlocutors such as Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* and Calicles in Plato's *Gorgias*.

Powell and Campbell are right. I treat Handke as a trope for a postmodern approach to the Balkans. Powell and Campbell insist that Handke, however, is not a representative trope but a metonymy. Unlike a metaphor, whose representativeness is based on similarity, the representativeness of metonymy is based on contingency. Handke is to postmodernism as sweat is to hard work. The peculiar feature of this criticism is that metonymy is a powerful rhetorical strategy in postmodern analysis. Powell and Campbell cry foul when one is postmodern with postmodernism.

Powell and Campbell misunderstand me when they say I vilify postmodernism. Postmodernism affirms the imperative that intellectual engagement be a matter of action, which is why the intellectual approach is becoming popular in the seminary. I respect this principle. Where I differ is in my belief that such engagement generates transcendent understanding, a possibility postmodernism, like positivism, disparages as metaphysical.

My rhetorical strategy is Burkean, which is partly postmodern, i.e., deconstructive, and partly classical, i.e., Socratically dialectical. I cite Burke's pithy comment on "perspective by incongruity," "It also makes us sensitive to the point at which one of these ingredients becomes hypertrophied, with the corresponding atrophy of the other" (1989:261-62). To give a clear example, compare Max Weber on the ethical irrationality of the world and Martin Luther King Jr. on the moral rationality of the world as two ingredients. Weber takes a non-essentialist position. In "Politics as a Vocation," Weber writes, "No ethics in the world can dodge the fact that in numerous instances the attainment of 'good' ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones — and facing the possibility or even the probability of evil ramifications" (1946:121). With great empirical wisdom Weber challenges the essentialism in the ethic of conviction and the innocence of the "true believer." In contrast, King takes an essentialist position. In "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," King writes, "But we will never have peace in the world until men everywhere recognize that ends are not cut off from means, because the means represent the ideal in the making, and the end in process, and ultimately you can't reach good ends through evil means, because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree" (1986:255). King challenges the inherent illogicality in the moral epistemology that Weber formulates as the ethic of responsibility.

When we compare Weber and King as two ingredients, each becomes hypertrophied with the corresponding atrophy of the other. When Weber takes the critique of the ethic of conviction to its limit, he encompasses the ethic of conviction. Weber writes, "It is immensely moving when a *mature* man — no matter whether old or young in years — is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul ... In so far as this is true, an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute ... a man who *can* have the 'calling for politics.'" (1946:127). Weber's famous polemic on ethics and politics is in the end based on a false dichotomy; the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility are two poles dialectically connected. When King in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" admonishes the short-sightedness of the ethic of responsibility of white clergy in Birmingham, Alabama, he assumes the far-sightedness of the ethic of responsibility. King points out, "If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century" (1964:79). King's comment now draws upon the ethic of responsibility more than the ethic of conviction. Weber's hypertrophy becomes King's atrophy, and King's atrophy becomes Weber's hypertrophy. Burke writes regarding perspective by incongruity, "A well-balanced ecology requires the symbiosis of the two" (1989:262).

Weber says that "the primary task of useful teacher is to teach his students to recognize 'inconvenient' facts — I mean facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions. And for every party opinion there are facts that are extremely inconvenient, for my own opinion no less than for others" (1946:147). Powell raises inconvenient facts for my opinions, and I am grateful for this. His provocation moves me to account more precisely and more critically for *Understanding Evil*. His comments have encouraged me to revisit Arendt's work in *The Human Condition*, which I now feel remiss for not including in *Understanding Evil*.

In this context, it is challenging to respond to the harsh conclusions in Powell's rejoinder. Powell argues that my accounts of people who have suffered sexual and ethnic violence are uncharitable; my accounts show neither compassion nor sympathy. Powell writes, "To ignore the gendered dimension of rape as a war crime, and to write of sexual violation only from the point of view of the male antagonist, without considering the experiences of the women involved, is to participate in that sexism in which women exist only as objects that men struggle over" (2007). It is difficult to understand how Powell accuses *Understanding Evil* of such sexism when one reads the following passage from the book: "The rapes that occurred in Bosnia during the war were assaults on individuals' bodies and selves. The purpose was not just to harm a woman or young girl's body, although this was one purpose. The purpose was also to destroy a person's sense of self as a free and self-conscious person. The damage that rape does to the self, while sometimes invisible, takes longer to heal than the damage done to the body, although the harm to the body and the harm to the self are both acts of injustice" (Doubt 2006:35). I continue, "The rape camp is designed to force the person to give up her species-being because retaining it becomes itself a source of horror and pain. Witnessing these brutalities against others and oneself is venomous to the person's species-being. Rape is a war crime because it is an attempt to destroy a community and sever the bonds of interdependency based on care and trust" (Doubt 2006:37).

Powell makes another strong accusation regarding my use of Harold Garfinkel's concept of status degradation ceremony; he says, "Rather than infer that the theory does not apply, Doubt assumes that the theory captures the essence of degradation and insists that the victims of these scenarios were not degraded. Fitting history to the Procrustean bed of theory in this way is always poor science, but when the victims of violence are concerned it is morally as well as epistemologically objectionable. People who have been victimized by sexual violence generally do feel themselves to be violated and degraded, and a sociologist's responsibility is to inquire sympathetically into the particulars of that experience" (2007). Again, it is challenging to understand how Powell charges *Understanding Evil* with the fallacy of reification when one reads the following cited passage: "It is important to address the reasons why the gunman's attempted degradation ceremony fails. The gunman fails in his attempt to debase you because he cannot be a legitimate spokesperson for the values he claims to share with his witnesses when he flagrantly violates these values. This event is the gunman's ideas, and you are the object of the gunman's projection. Your selection is arbitrary; it has no relation to you as particular person ... The gunman cannot denounce you if the reason for the conduct for which you are being denounced is entirely coerced by him" (Doubt 2007:31).

Where, then, is Powell coming from? What moves him to make these charges of sexism and reification so forcefully? It is better to not be defensive in light of Powell's accusations but try to grasp the nature of our difference. There are two ways to take the role of another who suffers social violence. One is to take the role of the other so as to honor the exclusiveness and incomparability of the person's suffering. Eventually, this approach elevates the status of the person to a pariah (Blum 1982:79). With Dorothy E. Smith, Powell champions this approach. Against "the ruling relation" of sociology, Smith writes, "Issues are formulated because they are administratively relevant, not because they are significant first in the experience of those who live them" (1990:15). Powell defends the subjects of social violence from the injustice of my interpretative approach that does not treat the experience of lived violence as absolutely first.

There is, however, a second way to take the role of another who suffers social violence. This way does two things simultaneously; it takes the role of the other as someone who suffers and as someone who, at the same time, takes the role of what George Herbert Mead (1956) refers to as the "generalized other." This approach addresses the capacity of human beings to take not only their

own role as victims but also the perspective of “the generalized other” toward injustice and violence. Post-war memoirs, documentaries, literature, and cinema from Bosnia not only exemplify but demand this approach; these poignant, dramatic works do what the “gazing” world itself was not able to do and still is not able to do. This approach bears witness to the resiliency of the human spirit and profundity of humanity; it resists evil in ways that evil cannot counter. Powell is right, though. There is a degree of analytical violence in this approach, a degree, however, that I would call neither unjust nor uncaring.

Addressing the primary task of a useful teacher, Weber says, “I believe the teacher accomplishes more than a mere intellectual task if he compels his audience to accustom itself to the existence of such facts. I would be so immodest as even to apply the expression ‘moral achievement’” (1946:147). I am grateful to Powell for compelling me to accustom myself to the existence of inconvenient facts for my opinions. His provocations are not only useful. I would say and conclude with Weber that Powell’s rejoinder is a moral achievement from which I have benefited.

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