

Reply to Keith Doubt

Keith Doubt's reply to my review brings closer to the surface those defining assumptions that motivated my criticisms of *Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia*. The issues at stake have a general significance for how sociologists investigate genocide, so I would like to comment on them further.

Doubt and I share an earnest desire to see the perpetrators of atrocity stripped of their impunity and held accountable for their actions. We agree, I think, that: in their lives together, human beings generate that domain of emergent phenomena which can be called the "social" or "society" in the broad sense of the term; that the phenomena of this domain make it possible for us to experience our lives as possessed of whatever meaning and wholeness we have access to; that genocide attacks not just our individual but our social being, and with it the very conditions of possibility for meaningful existence; and that this particular violence, which Doubt calls "sociocide", constitutes the radically horrifying or "evil" quality of atrocities like those committed during the Bosnian civil war. We disagree most sharply on the place for metaphysical essentialism in sociological explanation, and in the political engagement that sociology aims to further; Doubt's position is essentialist and mine, anti-essentialist. Between two such fundamentally different frames of reference there is no adjudicating, because essentialists and anti-essentialists have incommensurate notions of what counts as truth. But we can ask pragmatically, of any frame of reference, what are its consequences — what kinds of explanation does it allow and what kinds of action does it imply. A great deal of sociological work, some of very best, has started from essentialisms and proceeded to informative and useful structural explanations of social phenomena. But in *Understanding Evil*, the most harmful features of essentialist thinking are on display: an egocentric projection of the author's own values into the natural universe, and the consequent obliteration of the actual motives and lived experiences of social actors.

One of the key propositions in *Understanding Evil* is that evil cannot be social action. This is at odds with Weber's position in *Economy and Society*, which defined action as social "insofar as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals) it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course" (Weber 1978, p. 4). By this standard, genocide (or sociocide) clearly is action — as Doubt's analysis of the Bosnian civil war vividly demonstrates. There, the genocidaires deliberately targeted key integrative institutions of Bosnian society — families, homes, funerals — in order to affect the behaviour of the victims in definite ways. To claim that genocide is not action, Doubt assumes that action must be "a positive force". So the assertion that evil is not action follows tautologically, and the principal argument of *Understanding Evil*, its "demonstration" that evil cannot be action, is an elaboration of this tautology.

The related assertion that "as a goal of action, sociocide is unintelligible, and for this reason evil ... is 'thought-defying'" also rests on a tautology: Doubt agrees with Martin Buber that "evil is lack of direction", and obviously a "lack of direction" cannot be the goal of action. This tautology is underpinned by the conviction that every action aims at some good, so that evil results from "not knowing what is right and nothing more" (*Understanding Evil*, p. 3). This argument conflates "some good" with "the good"; Doubt follows Socrates in assuming that there is such a thing as "the good" which is singular and the same for everyone, such that the proper exercise of reason could reveal what that good is. But this essentializing conception of "good" obscures the empirical fact that different actors can have different conceptions of what is good, and of what is moral — mutually opposed conceptions that each make sense on their own terms. It treats the sociologist's own values,

not as local social action, but as an objective feature of the natural universe. This leads to blindness and denial. Speaking of the instrumental claim that the benefits of genocide may outweigh the costs, Doubt says "no individual in the world sees this position as moral", and on this point he is gravely mistaken. The perpetrators of genocide often do see themselves as fulfilling a moral obligation. In Spanish America under the conquistadors, at the frontiers of the expanding United States of America during its "Indian wars", in the Flinders Island concentration camp for Aboriginal Tasmanians, the perpetrators of genocide exulted in their own moral righteousness as agents of God or of civilization, and they were celebrated as such by Church and state in the societies to which they belonged (see Stannard 1992, Churchill 1998, Ryan 1996). Claudia Koonz has shown how even the Nazi holocaust was established by its perpetrators as a perceived moral duty and a service to humanity (Koonz 2003). Genocidal acts result not only from disregard for moral rules but from earnest moral convictions — quite regardless of whether those convictions are "correct" or "true" in any metaphysical sense. And where genocidal actions succeed in contributing to an enduring social order, as has been the case in Australia and throughout the Americas, they continue to be celebrated as moral in dominant discourses. Doubt opines about the "ghosts" of the Beothuk, but the 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. Sociologists *must* confront these facts if we are to make any contribution to opposing genocide.

These are not arguments for nihilism or despair. In his response to my review, Doubt implies that sociologists must choose between believing that the world is ethically rational and believing that it is ethically irrational, between moral essentialism and "political realism and moral indifference". This sort of claim, a secular counterpart to the theistic claim that without God there is no reason to be moral, is all too common. It derives its appeal from the habit of thought of those accustomed to believing that the universe is inherently moral, and that true morality is derived from a correct understanding of the order of things. But to an anti- or non-essentialist thinker, the world is neither ethically rational nor ethically irrational "in itself". Through social relationships, human beings produce the frameworks of meaning that enable us to experience the world as ethically rational or irrational — or, indeed, as neither. This condition does not deprive us of all possible reasons for acting compassionately or in solidarity with others, or for making personal sacrifices in the pursuit of the kind of social order that the word "humane" connotes. For many relativistic thinkers, it is the very absence of any divine or metaphysical justice providing a safety net under the contingencies of history that makes moral engagement so very urgent.

Doubt's misunderstanding of non-essentialist positions is most apparent in his essay on Peter Handke. In his response to my review he states that "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", but what my review actually said was that "Doubt treats postmodernism as a unified theoretical position 'founded' by Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard". Postmodernism is not a unified theoretical position, neither Foucault nor Derrida embraced the label of postmodernist (Foucault refused it outright), and the impression *Understanding Evil* gives is that its author does not know or care very much about the specifics of postmodernist thought. Doubt has presented this argument before about the "postmodern" flaws of Handke's thinking (Doubt 2000), and the errors that Campbell (2001) pointed out in his review of that work have not been corrected in *Understanding Evil*. Doubt repeatedly and explicitly ascribes Handke's self-serving nationalist mythmaking, his disregard for the historical record or the rights of non-Serbs, to the allegedly "postmodern" nature of his thinking. But Doubt never shows how Handke's thought is in any way indebted to or even engaged with postmodernist scholarship. Handke's refusal of moral universalism does not make him

a postmodernist. Blaming postmodernists for Handke's offenses is at best careless and at worst, slanderous. Again, this kind of thing — blaming postmodernism or relativism for the evils of moral chauvinists — is all too common, and it serves no useful purpose.

The most deleterious consequence of the particular way *Understanding Evil* relies on essentialisms appears in its analysis of how Serbian gunmen forced fathers at gunpoint to rape their own daughters. Garfinkel's theoretical model of the degradation ceremony requires certain conditions that did not obtain in these particular situations. 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. To deny that experience in the service of theoretical formalism is itself a kind of violence. This is compounded by Doubt's disregard for the obvious gender dynamics of the situations he describes. Perpetrator and victims shared patriarchal norms which informed the meaning that those particular kinds of rapes had for those involved, norms that determined who was violated, how, and why. 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 antagonists, 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. Through such practices, sociology implicates itself in what Dorothy Smith (1990) has called the "relations of rule", in which the theoretical objectification of social experience serves, however inadvertently, the practical transformation of living human beings into dehumanized objects of domination.

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