Toward an Anthropology of Evil?

Review by Tom Clark

William C. Olsen and Thomas J. Csordas, 2019, Engaging evil: A Moral Anthropology. Berghahn Books, 306 pp, ISBN 978-1-78920213-7

The social sciences have remained stubbornly resistant to the direct study of evil in society. According to Edwin Lemert (1997), there are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, the Abrahamic heritage of the term would appear to confine it to a very particular ethnocentric history - and this is not seen to be a concern of contemporary social science. Secondly, there is something of an inherent tension between the moral engagement necessary to study evil, and the theoretical indifference that is required by disciplines that want to retain a sense of objectivity.

However, this apparent indifference to evil is despite its continuing and varied realization within the human world. Among many instances, it can be found in narratives of structural violence, political ideology, religious practice, administrative neglect, individual pathology, criminal behavior, and folklore and superstition.

Although anthropology has a direct interest in many of these areas, it too has generally remained quiet about the subject of evil. While David Parkin's *Anthropology of Evil* (1985) and Paul Clough and Jon Mitchell's *the Power of Good and Evil* (2001) will be familiar to some, they are two of only a handful of texts that have attempted to explore how anthropology might approach the topic. In their own way, both examine whether evil is relative to a very particular (Western) moral ideology, or whether it has a wider, more universal appeal. The central point of discussion

is the extent to which it is possible to gloss over the linguistic and behavioral particulars of different cultures and infer a shared moral sense of evil. Or, would such an inference be necessarily meaningless without context? Perhaps worse for the anthropologist, would such a use of evil be yet another example of a culturally-defined imposition on the 'exotic other'?

In their very welcome edited collection of essays, *Engaging Evil: A Moral Anthropology*, William Olsen and Thomas Csordas argue that evil *is* an existential feature of human relations. Indeed, they highlight that an analysis of the ethical properties of society that only considers how people strive to do the right thing will lack the depth required to comprehend the moral frameworks that underpin the whole of a society, and the human world more generally.

For Olsen and Csordas, evil is a malevolent destructiveness that can be active or passive in nature, and directed at an interpersonal or collective level. It has a descriptive reality in that people use evil in ways that go beyond violence, criminality, and hatred on one hand, and suffering, anguish, and loss on the other. It can, of course, also be more supernatural in nature. But what these evils share is a perceived attack on the ontological security of the human world, and that attack threatens to overwhelm the very notion of society completely.

In taking this argument, Olsen and Csordas attempt to rearticulate a vision for an anthropology of evil - and in doing so they reflect some of the major concerns first explored in Parkin's initial collection. Using evil as an *analytical* category could necessitate the very real possibility of moral universalism, but as the chapter by Csordas goes on to point out, this doesn't mean rejecting the apparent tolerance brought by cultural relativism either. This, he suggests, is because'[e]vil or its cognates are broadly identifiable across cultures' (p 38).

To these ends, the chapters of *Engaging Evil* are variously directed toward exploring the relationship between anthropology and evil - and the resulting collection offers some thoughtful analysis about the nature of evil more generally. Organized into three thematic sections - evil and anthropology, evil and suffering, and, evil and violence - the chapters are diverse in focus, but retain an emphasis on exploring evil *in situ*. Collectively, they offer insights from anthropology, textual analysis, literary and cinematic criticism, bioarchaeology and the occasional visit to the

psychoanalyst's chair. The chapters are also global in nature with focus given to, among others, Trinidad, Niger, Indonesia, and even the Old Kent Road (London).

To be clear, not all the authors in this volume accept the use of evil as an analytical category, and some are overtly skeptical of both the moral universalism *and* the Abrahamic heritage that might otherwise be implied by its invocation. This is, perhaps, given the most sustained attention in the chapter by Byron Good. He highlights that just because people use something akin to evil to understand the human world, it does not mean that we should accept its existence or use it as an analytical frame of reference. He points out that evil is not simply underwritten on cultural lines, but individual ones too - and if Western audiences cannot agree on what is evil, what hope is there for anthropological agreement? Ventura Perez's discussion of the body, bioculture, and violence in Mexico similarly ruminates on the consequences of locating a pathological evil within an individual or society 'gone wrong.' To do so, he notes, risks ignoring 'the complexity of structural systems, culture, and history of the communities in which these acts are produced' (p 247). Nerina Weiss' exploration of the experience of torture is a similar reminder that it can be dangerous to see perpetrators as monstrous or somehow spectacular - they have everyday lives and their experiences are part of much wider political systems. In such cases, evil might obscure more than it illuminates.

Some of the chapters are, perhaps, more agnostic on the use of evil for anthropological purposes and instead seek to document cases of its realization. Adeline Masquelier, for example, demonstrates some of the intricacies of evil in cases of spirit possession in secondary school girls in Niger. Simon Coleman also provides an informative description of how Nigerian migrants who worship at two Pentecostal churches in London variously use evil to navigate their religious and migrant identities. Elsewhere, Julie Peteet examines how evil in Palestine and Israel is a politically motivated strategy of calibrated excess that features structural and physical violence, experiential suffering, and administrative indifference. Evil is not the stuff of a magical realm, but instead results from the desire for colonial dominance and subjugation.

However, some authors are more actively receptive to the potential of a shared anthropology of evil. In examining the conceptual resemblances in Buddhism and Christian soteriology,

Gananath Obeyesekere explores how radical evil might be said to exist in the Buddhist storytelling of Sri-Lanka and elsewhere. Andrew Beatty similarly offers an interesting account of how the problem of evil might be reinterpreted in the local context of two contrasting Indonesian societies: Java and Nias. Unsurprisingly perhaps, William Olsen also finds evil intentions in explanations of *asram* - sudden infant death - within Asante culture.

The final chapter of the book is given to David Parkin, who once again reiterates his belief that all societies experience seemingly unspeakable horrors of destructive human behavior. Evil - however it is actually expressed - then works as a process that moves from experiential horror, to one that is identified through words, and then realized within actions. He goes on to remind us that only by recognizing evil as a process will we be able to provide explanations for the inequalities and depredations that drive the resentment, hatred, and neglect necessary for such destructiveness to occur.

Indeed, the value of the collection lies in both its breadth and its focus. Unlike its predecessor *the Anthropology of Evil* - which was uneven in style and substance - Olsen and Csordas's text offers a sustained examination of what an anthropology of evil might look like. To this end, it explores both the diverse realization of evil, and the potential consequences of using evil as an analytical category for anthropological work. In doing so, it makes a convincing case for a situational understanding of evil that moves beyond rigid binaries of universalism and relativism to show how evil is identified, negotiated, and managed *in context*. While such a use of evil for the purposes of anthropology might still be a step too far for many, the text is a stark reminder of the destructive potential of humanity, our collective need to come to try and come to terms with the consequences of that destructiveness, and, perhaps, a shared desire to do something about it.

Works Cited:
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