



Anthropology Book Forum

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Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, 2023,
Perpetrators Encountering Humanity's Dark Side, Stanford: Stanford
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In *Perpetrators Encountering Humanity's Dark Side*, two veteran anthropologists provide the discipline with a set of practical lessons for conducting fieldwork with interlocutors who have participated in mass atrocities. These lessons are based on the “practical wisdom” – what the authors also term as *phronesis* by borrowing from ancient Greek (p. 5) – that they have developed through their decades of research in Argentina and Cambodia, where two politically different kinds of authoritarian regimes unleashed programmes of mass violence on their populations in the 1970s. The book begins with a desire to address “anthropology’s lack of methodological reflection on encounters with perpetrators of mass violence in the field,” but is far more than a methods guide. The book is in part ethnographic self-analysis and in part a Socratic dialogue involving the authors. It begins with theoretical reflections on what perpetration means (Introduction), and continues to examine the problems that ethnographers face when conducting research with agents of violence (Part I, including Chapters 1 and 2), the marks that these violent interlocutors leave on the researchers (Part II including Chapters 3 and 4), and the problem of ethnographically writing about difficult and violent subjects (Part III including Chapters 5 and 6). Each part is introduced by interludes which set out the themes examined in the subsequent chapters.

In the Introduction, the authors make a case for preserving “perpetrator” as a concept because of the “analytical affordances” (p. 6) which it provides. Building on Uğur Ümit Üngör and Kjell Anderson’s framework which differentiates between “architects,” “organizers” and “killers” of mass violence, Robben and Hinton come up with the analytical category of “perpetrator-facilitator” in order to empirically probe the multifaceted issues of “agency, motivation, and dehumanization” (p. 9) provoked by the actual perpetrators that they encountered in their fields. Meditating in a dialogue with his co-author on the indeterminacy of the term “perpetrator,” Robben urges researchers to use the term to refer to anyone that participated in a mass atrocity “at whichever organizational and operational level,” and continues to recognise that “there are no universal criteria [for analytically applying the term]. Researchers need to weigh each and every case” (p. 12). In the dialogue, Hinton further advises researchers to examine processes and “be very careful with typologies, even as they can, when used with care (as Üngör and Anderson do), be useful analytical containers and facilitate research” (p. 13). Such dialogues between the authors occur throughout the book, and they encourage the reader to be an active participant in an ongoing exchange between the authors.

In Part I, the authors reflect on their field encounters with perpetrators in Cambodia and Argentina to raise two major issues. In Chapter 1, Hinton states that his early research in Cambodia had a “dramatic optics” that preconceived encounter with Khmer Rouge perpetrators in a particularly “spectacular” way: “What, if anything, is an interview with a perpetrator other than spectacular? It is an encounter structured around the extraordinary: the

ultimate transgression, the killing of another human being” (p. 48). However, the interviews that Hinton later managed to arrange were anything but spectacular: “Almost everyone, especially those who did the physical killing, tried to downplay their involvement even when they partly acknowledged their role... Everyone wanted to be exceptional, not spectacular, although many were quite willing to tell spectacular DK perpetrator stories” (p. 54). This mismatch between his preconceptions and subsequent field encounters leads Hinton to conclude that “the first step to interviewing perpetrators... is to set aside our spectacular optics to the best of our ability” (p. 59). This call for approaching perpetrators as humans – instead of simple monsters – who provide avenues into understanding humanity’s dark side comes with the risk of misunderstanding and understating their culpability. After all, many perpetrators try to justify, relativise, or contextualise their actions and seek to persuade the interviewer into their particular worldview. In Chapter 2, Robben addresses this repeatedly observed tendency of perpetrators through what he terms the problem of “ethnographic seduction.” This refers to the interviewed perpetrators’ attempts “to protect a positive self-image, avoid compromising issues, and make ethnographers accept their [shallow] discourse as the truth” (p. 79). Robben had repeatedly faced this risk of being “led astray” when he interviewed Argentinian officers involved in enforced disappearances. However, by reflecting on minute dynamics of the interview situation, he devised strategies for recognising and avoiding it. Most crucially, Robben learned to -and urges others to do too- conduct a “reflexive examination of the unconscious emotional dynamics” which play during and after these interviews (p.79). These warnings serve towards achieving an optimal researcher disposition that permits approaching perpetrators with affective and cognitive “empathy” but -most importantly- without compassion. This state of “empathy without compassion” is for Robben the best way of empirically grasping and anthropologically analysing perpetrators.

In Part II the authors reflect on the traces that their violent interlocutors have left on their own psyches; more specifically, they focus on their own dreams and nightmares. In Chapter 4, Robben focuses on several of his dreams to examine unresolved personal histories that unconsciously informed his research in Argentina and his ambivalent emotions towards his interlocutors. Having entered psychoanalysis during his fieldwork in Argentina, albeit remaining unconvinced of its claims, Robben nevertheless concludes that his relationship with his father – and his father’s brother who went missing during World War II – defined his relationship with Argentinian officers to whom he transferred his ambivalent relationship and conflicts with his father (p. 116). The “practical wisdom” he urges others is an awareness of “the psychodynamics that influences the interaction with perpetrators, and emotional reactions to the often evasive accounts of violence and terror” (p. 129). While Robben’s experiences imply the possibility of healthy separation, Hinton argues for the inevitability of contagion and abjection. Analysing a dream involving Khmer Rouge’s infamous S-21 killing centre, subsequently turned into a museum, Hinton eventually confesses:

I don’t mean to engage in a self-pitying exercise. I have never written about these issues and never considered doing so until Tony suggested we co-write this book and include a section on dreaming. But it is something that needs to be acknowledged. There is a psychological cost to studying the ruins of perpetration. It leads to a direct confrontation with death and horror. It dirties you and makes you abject. Perpetrator research invites the “black sun” (p. 144).

Confronting this abjection directly provides one path to regaining a sense of self, and this also leads to Part III's concern with ethics of representation and writing about perpetration. In Chapter 5, Robben demonstrates the importance of providing polyphonic accounts of events and actors and avoiding writing styles that flatten the "paradoxical" social status of perpetrators. This is a challenge because it again risks relativising and understating culpability in violence; for Robben, the solution lies in establishing a "proper distance" in narration that explicitly condemns perpetrators' action while seeking to empathetically understand their violence (p. 185-188). For Hinton, the solution resides in carefully "curating" material to enable representation of characters and situations without an overbearing academic analysis that "freezes" its subjects (p. 191). In Chapter 6, Hinton finds resolution in writing an "ethnodrama" that "includes elements of dramatic structure and uses language and narrative structure to raise questions and evoke ambiguities often glossed over in expository writing" (p. 193). Indeed, the main issue for Hinton is learning to write without reliance on academic "banisters" that limit movement (p. 198). These "banisters" are particularly unhelpful when addressing subjects as difficult as perpetration, for "the first lesson of perpetrator research" – that researchers should always beware that the metaphorical figure of Medusa is always present in the room during perpetrator research - requires ample room for movement to be properly applied.

In overall, *Perpetrators Encountering Humanity's Dark Side* provides a therapeutic and rewarding read for anthropologists and social scientists who have come into contact with agents of violence through their research, as well as for those who expect to do so. These lessons are most immediately useful for those studying transitional contexts where perpetrators are more immediately detectable as social actors through local categories: both Cambodia and Argentina were undergoing turbulent periods of coming to terms with their violent pasts at the time of the authors' research. In other contexts, such as my doctoral field site in Cyprus, perpetrators of ethnic violence are rarely pointed out as such, and thus they remain more evasive than in many other comparable contexts. There is no indication in the book how Robben and Hinton's "practical wisdoms" can be applied in contexts where overt denial is the norm among suspected perpetrators, and where an increasingly pervasive indifference defines the social relations with past violence. These issues do not diminish the "practical wisdoms" outlined in the book, as they explicitly call for application in other contexts, and provide fascinating points for further thinking and praxis.

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