

Critical Criminological Perspectives

The *Palgrave Critical Criminological Perspectives* book series aims to showcase the importance of critical criminological thinking when examining problems of crime, social harm and criminal and social justice. Critical perspectives have been instrumental in creating new research agendas and areas of criminological interest. By challenging state defined concepts of crime and rejecting positive analyses of criminality, critical criminological approaches continually push the boundaries and scope of criminology, creating new areas of focus and developing new ways of thinking about, and responding to, issues of social concern at local, national and global levels. Recent years have witnessed a flourishing of critical criminological narratives and this series seeks to capture the original and innovative ways in which these discourses are engaging with contemporary issues of crime and justice

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Critical Criminological Perspectives

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Making Sense of Evil

An Interdisciplinary Approach

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For my family and my students

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Acknowledgements

Evil is a magnet for cliché. When I say many people contributed to this book, like all clichés, it is a cliché because it is for the most part true. Who are these people? Mainly, they are my students: past, present and undoubtedly future. I have been very fortunate to have come to the University of Hull and on my arrival here some six years ago, to be asked by my boss/Head of Department/fearless (more or less) leader, 'How would you like to give a class on evil?' It is a testament to Professor Peter Young's undeniable charm that I found myself answering with an enthusiastic, 'Yes! I'd love to.' And here we are.

Little did I know what precisely I was getting myself into, or how hard it would be—intellectually, emotionally and spiritually—for both me and my students. But over the years, this is what we have come up with, again more or less. These are my thoughts and my approaches to the subject. They are certainly not comprehensive, and by no means the last word, but the writers, thinkers, social scientists and other reprobates referenced here somehow got into the frame in the process of my engaging with my students about this vexed and fascinating topic. I hope readers will like it too, and I hope students—not just mine—will find it useful and, dare I say it, inspiring. If not, please to feel free to do better!

So, to my students, thank you. This is for you.

I would also like to thank Palgrave Macmillan for giving me the chance to write and publish this book, and special thanks go to Julia Willan and Harriet Barker for their kindness, generosity and patience in this endeavour. For all this and for your advice, I offer my sincere gratitude. I would also like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers who offered advice on improving the original draft; again, thank you so much. I have tried to follow your guidance but, of course, any errors or shortcomings that still remain are attributable solely to me. I give thanks also to the generous and enthusiastic support of Professor Reese Walters who read the draft and very graciously suggested that the book be included in the Critical Criminology series. Looking at the other titles and authors in the series, I have to say I feel seriously outclassed! It is a wonderful thing to be included in such an auspicious group, and I cannot thank all of you enough.

Finally, in the spirit of cliché, I would be entirely remiss if I did not acknowledge the contribution of my family: Paul, Sam, Luke, Greta, our littlest vampire Genevieve and my dog/constant companion when writing, Stan. Anything worthwhile that might by chance come from me originates in them. Anything worth doing or having that I might conceive is, as always, for them.

Preface

The Palgrave Critical Criminology series of books is devoted to showcasing the importance of critical criminological thinking as applied to problems of crime, harm and justice from new or, we may venture, 'skewed' perspectives. Evil is not new, but it is definitely and deeply implicated in suffering, harm, wrongdoing and justice, and it is most resolutely skew-whiff. If you don't think so now, trust me, you will do when you get to the end of this book.

When we talk about evil, or identify something or someone as being evil, that is usually the end of the story: the moral conclusion. Think of those chats we have over the dinner table (or tray), at the bus stop or in the pub, sometimes with close friends or intimates, sometimes with strangers. The news is on, or there's a newspaper placard, some such, proclaiming with shrill indignation the latest horror *du jour*. The conversation begins. Why did that woman so callously torture and murder her own small child? Why did the nursery worker/broadcaster/priest/teacher/etc. use his (or sometimes her) position to sexually abuse those children? Why do people bully others online, often people they don't even know, to the point of pushing them to suicide? Why did the serial killer rape and kill all those people? The answer? Because they are *evil*. This is the moral and, hence, the end of the story. To continue, question, interrogate or go any deeper into the gory details, or to adopt the position of 'devil's advocate' or try to see both sides would be to make yourself look like a ghoulish voyeur, suspicious by association or just plain weird; not 'normal', like the rest of us dishing out the label of 'evil' and then stepping back alongside our comrades to shake our heads collectively in dismay at this latest incarnation of the 'other' sect. While society exists on a diet of evil, and regularly dines out on it, it is for the most part an exercise in binging and purgation, not a wholesome fulfilling meal. This book seeks to put some fibre and meat (or non-animal-based protein) back into this meal, which while it may not make it necessarily more palatable, will I hope add substance.

In his book on evil, Terry Eagleton uses the metaphor of violence to illustrate his viewpoint:

The word 'evil' is generally a way of bringing arguments to an end, like a fist in the solar plexus... Either human actions are explicable, in which case they cannot be evil; or they are evil, in which case there is nothing more to be said about them. The argument of this book is that neither of these viewpoints is true.

Eagleton (2010: 8)

The social sciences have historically concentrated on the question of the social 'good', treating evil as a residual, empty or negative category of human experience. Accordingly, evil has been conceptualized in social and criminological theory as the privation of 'the good'; a consequence of social processes that deny the legitimacy of human existence, survival, freedom, dignity and choice.

In the wake of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century horrors and atrocities, however, evil is increasingly construed more 'positively' as a category of social life in its own right: an active and dynamic phenomenon; something that human agents *do* to each other and the natural world and also *have done to them* by other human moral actors (the possibility of evil by non-human animals or natural evil is not part of the remit of this book). This book is designed to introduce readers and students of disciplines like criminology to the main themes and interdisciplinary theoretical approaches within this burgeoning field of study in the social and human sciences.

In the words of the twentieth-century French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), evil presents a challenge to human understanding that is not like any other (Ricoeur, 1984). It has, thus, been approached throughout history in a number of diverse and, at least to contemporary ways of thinking, bizarre, outrageous or even morally indefensible ways. Part of the challenge of evil that Ricoeur identified a generation ago was the need for us to make some fundamental decisions about how we want to think about evil and deal with it from now on. Because let's face it, the fact is that evil has always been with us and it always will be. It traverses time, distance and space, and impacts the lives of individual subjects as well as every conceivable type of group collective regardless of social variables such as class, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, age and so forth. To varying degrees, every person and all cultures and societies of all times have in some way or another had to grapple not just with the experience of evil but also with the age-old 'problem of evil', a term for which in the philosophical-theological tradition is known as *theodicy*. Everyone experiences evil at some point in their lives, usually in the form of suffering and wrongdoing, and it is generally believed

that we all know it when we see it. But is the problem of evil really so simple? In light of those undeniable and compelling facts, the question now, as Ricoeur sees it, is how we deal with evil on *our* terms, in late modernity, and from now on: should we think about it more, less or approach it differently than before? And can reflections on philosophical and theological resolutions of the problem of evil in theodicy help us in this process?

Until quite recently, academics and others in the scholarly communities for the most part have chosen the second option, pretty much ignoring evil as an embarrassment or irrelevance to the serious work of critical reflection on just about any subject. My discipline, criminology, has been at the vanguard of such an approach, tending to regard evil as a kind of sentimental or residual category that has nothing to do with the work of contemporary social-science research and, thus, has had its day. Evil has been perceived as the type of concept that the founders of the social sciences, such as Emile Durkheim or Karl Marx, regarded as a sort of catch-all category under which bad things that happened but were poorly understood (no science) people, things and/or events were placed. The preference was to construe evil as the diversity of 'social evils' that are traceable to a range of societal factors pertaining to various social demographics as the result of structural causes such as poverty, famine, disease, marginalization, violence, war or other external forms of inequality, crisis and/or deprivation. Since then, evil has been widely regarded by many as merely a sentimental if archaic notion of religious groups, tabloids and other quotidian discourses of moral outrage in response to trauma, suffering and harm with tangential links to the individual subject (a highly prized constituent of the modern moral and legal landscape), and as such really has no legitimate place in the scientific study of crime, punishment or criminal justice.

But maybe it's time for these attitudes and approaches to evil to undergo something of a radical rethink. Why? Because for one thing, there are many indications that the more we ignore evil, by assuming that it's an outdated concept or just stupid and the credo of brainwashed zealots, the more vulnerable to its most pernicious damage we seem to become and the more it tends to proliferate and expand, to happen again and again, and to become much worse either by getting more extreme (e.g. child sexual abuse, genocide) or pervasive (e.g. anxiety, depression). When we, in modern secular and so-called civil society, decide that evil is just not the topic for us, the sort of intellectual vacuum created seems to serve the interests of other moral and social

entrepreneurs who would make great capital out of the widespread ignorance of the notion and the distaste for it, thereby ensuring only that they are unhampered by the need to respond to any substantive external rational or temperate debate. And I am not talking about just the obvious bad guys of contemporary society like terrorists or serial killers who openly trade in evil, but increasingly other more 'legitimate' or enfranchised agents who often are empowered or backed up by the state, such as governmental regimes (e.g. the Bush administration, the Mugabe regime, the BBC), corporate actors (e.g. bankers, the military, the police) or members of the criminal justice system (e.g. judges who cite evil as an explanatory factor in their sentencing reports)—all of whom either rely upon or take recourse to evil as an explanatory or causal factor, or in some cases actually make their livings and advance their careers by doing it so well! Maybe it's time, as the philosopher Hannah Arendt argued sagely in the wake of the Holocaust, to face up to evil as a problem for *our* times, as a question and challenge for *our* world and our possible futures; something to take seriously and try to better understand, and thereby minimize in what is a complex institutional and diverse modern social and moral framework. If we take this approach, as I suggest we do, then where do we start? Ricoeur poses an important question, and however we choose to answer it, the way the question has been articulated presupposes that we first have a sufficiently robust knowledge of how evil has been thought about and dealt with before, throughout history and across different societies and cultures. This is so that we can learn from the past, and not repeat the same mistakes or at least not in the same disastrous ways, thereby helping to ensure a better response in the future. That is what this book is fundamentally about.

This book addresses current trends in the study of evil, arranged over three main themes or sections:

- Theodicy and the origins of an onto-theological concept of evil in theology, rationalist epistemology and moral philosophy—in these chapters, we will concentrate on the language and experience of evil as conceived within various religious, theological and philosophical traditions.
- Evil as symbol, myth and literary trope in the narrative approaches of psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and cultural studies—in this section of the book, we will concentrate on how we tell stories about evil; that is, how we use narrative to make sense of it, castigate it and even enjoy it.

- Evil as a product of collective and individual experience—as shaped by the body, gender, everyday life, the family and the state—as represented in ‘post-metaphysical’ theories of evil in sociology, anthropology, feminism, politics and criminology; in other words, we will examine how evil is finally being recognized within contemporary scholarship, and how these ways of discussing it help us to make sense of our own experiences of evil as embedded within these seminal social institutions.

This book is organized into ten chapters, each concentrating on a different theoretical approach and/or topic:

- Theodicy—the problem of evil in a world created by a benevolent God
- Enter the Evil Genius—encountering metaphysical evil
- Radical freedom, radical evil? The problem of evil as one for modern moral science
- Telling evil stories—understanding cultural narratives and symbols of evil in the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur
- ‘Something to be scared of’—evil, myth and psychoanalytic theory
- Evil and literature—romanticism and after
- Doing evil—what makes evil a compulsion
- Genocide, slavery, holocaust and war—atrocious and the banality of evil
- Axes of evil—the war on terror, the ‘enemy within’ and the politics of evil and the state
- Touching the void or through a glass darkly? Rethinking evil in criminology

But at the outset, what we must try to avoid assuming that these three ‘phases’ of study, theory and/or analysis are in any way a comprehensive representation of evil—that is, covering all the ways of dealing with the subject of evil—or that they somehow represent a kind of logical progression, if not of history, then of thought, whereby one ‘phase’ is distinct from or follows on from and supersedes its predecessor. What I mean here is that just because religious conceptions of evil tend to come first historically, this does not necessarily mean that they are cancelled out by subsequent philosophical or postmodern thinking on the subject; previous language about evil has a nasty tendency to pop up in the most unexpected places, so keep a look out. As the cultural and literary theorist Terry Eagleton (among others whose work will be examined

here) argues in his book *Holy Terror* (2005), love, fear, sacrifice, martyrdom, scapegoating, the sublime and death are just as relevant to the functioning of the modern nation state today as they ever were to any social assemblage across cultures and throughout history. And when you drill down into them, they are jolly interesting too.

Will this book solve the problem of evil? I could be evasive and say that the answer to this question is 'unlikely', but I know that it is 'no'. But the odd thing is that when you look at all these theories and theses together, that's OK. In fact, it's probably a good thing, because if there's anything that seems to get evil people on the rampage or evil events underway, it's thinking that we've got it all sussed and sorted out: 'no problemo'. As we will see, the notional application of rationality and the plain old job of making sense out of evil can end up being really and truly horrendously awful. The task is, then, to try to make sense of the darkly inexplicable without making too much sense, if you see what I mean. Or to try to maintain a healthy distrust in our *faith* (because that is what it is) in the institutional, bureaucratic and scientific systems we devise to deal with these evil bastards who do such terrible things—no system will ever completely stop them but, of course, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. To deal effectively with evil, we need science, we need society, but we also need more (or sometimes possibly something else or less). What both the study and experience of evil reveals perhaps better than any other topic is just how messy and disruptive it is to any intellectual efforts to put order on it, and also just how durable older and more traditional, mythical and even highly personal and subjective ways of perceiving it are, even in the most modern and rationalized areas of our lives. So, although we might be ultra-moderns, even the most ancient ways of dealing with and understanding evil still have something to say to us, if only because we share with our ancestors the trait of being human.

Finally, with respect to the aim of the Critical Criminology series to highlight and advance innovative thinking and intellectual entrepreneurship in academic scholarship in criminology (and any other genre of thought, for that matter), the general aims of this book converge on using a range of interdisciplinary approaches (e.g. theological, philosophical, cultural, social-scientific and postmodern) to this distinctive area of human experience in order to enable readers to reflect upon the 'problem' of evil as a concept previously considered beyond the limits of social theory. This is not to pillory social theory, but to add to it, as I hope my readers and students will do, and do it better and with more courage and honesty than I have been able to do. This is to

further develop the critical capacity to utilize interdisciplinary theory in a criminological context in order to address this important area of contemporary social experience. I have chosen a number of examples in the book, such as the Rodney King beating and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon, to illustrate and try out the different theories. I hope you will choose your own examples from your own personal experience to do the same, and I encourage you to do so—your experiences of evil are significant and important. Don't be afraid to contribute your thoughts and to improve and further develop our discipline. I encourage you to be compassionate and thoughtful in your analysis, but also to be bold and brave. In an age dominated by the media and challenged by the scandals of victimization and the ideals of human rights, the study of evil could and should help us to understand and cope with these pressures and problems better. I do hope so anyway.

So, welcome, my new apprentices. Let our study of evil begin.