

BOOK REVIEWS

*Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit
Genocide and Mass Killing**

Reviewed by Steven K. Baum

It used to be that if you wanted to examine the psychology of genocidal thinking, there were only a handful of writers from which to choose. Over the last decade solid psychological examinations have been offered by Erving Staub¹ and Neil Kressel.² Now there is a third, and this newest contender can be proud as his is the most comprehensive work offering the best understanding of why we as a species hate so effectively.

James Waller, chair of Whitworth College's psychology department, has built on his previous writings (two previous books and several key articles) by offering a model of extraordinary evil that finally takes the awe from the awful and incomprehensible. Waller begins the daunting task of explaining hate by focusing on the conditions under which many of us could be transformed into killing machines. His focus remains locked on ordinary people. By sifting through thousands of research and theory articles from multiple sources, he creates a synthesis not previously known.

In section one, he examines several current notions of hate, i.e., group processes, ideological attraction, psychopathology (e.g., Mad Nazi), and personality (including critiques of Lifton and Milgram), and concludes that none of the prior conditions is sufficient to explain hate's processes. The next section introduces his own model of extraordinary evil and consists of shadow or ancestral drives, such as ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and social dominance; perpetrator identity components, such as cultural beliefs, moral disengagement, and self-interest; as well as context or culture of cruelty (socialization, group influences and role/person merger). The paradigm is easy and makes sense.

The final section consists of the question, "What have we learned and why does it matter?" and summarizes all that we currently have learned in the field. It should come as no surprise that this is the shortest section, so Waller correctly focuses on the burgeoning field of genocidal warning signs.

The book jacket states that *Explaining Evil* is written for layperson and academician alike. This is blatantly wrong. This is a scholarly work that provides hundreds of thoughtful and helpful footnotes. Perhaps the publishers meant to comment that the book is well written, or that it makes complicated concepts easy to understand. What the book does offer is a feature not seen in most works of this kind. This has to do with a structure that shifts back and

* By James Waller. Oxford University Press, 336 pages, \$29.95.

forth between theory and practice. For example, when a theoretical point is made, it is followed by a short first-person account of what life was like during mass killings in, say, Babi Yar, Croatia, or the lesser known Tonie Sap. Such vignettes create the effect of moderator in the foreground followed by visuals in the background and offer the reader an enhanced sense of reality. This provides some respite in an otherwise difficult and too theoretical topic.

Einstein once said that it is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the evil spirit of man. Waller has done a highly commendable job of furthering our understanding of that spirit.

NOTES

2. *Roots of Evil*, Cambridge University, 1989.
2. *Mass Hate*, Plenum, 1996/2002.