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Refusing Evil by (Sociotechnical) Design

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In March 2019, 50 Muslims were killed and 50 injured in a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. In 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina, USA, 9 Black worshippers and three injured while at church. And in 2011, 77 young people were killed in Norway at a summer holiday camp. The worshippers were killed with a pistol, the others with semi-automatic rifles.

Mass murders have also been carried out using hatchets and machetes, airplanes (including the German pilot who drove the plane into a mountain because he was frustrated about going blind), bicycles with bombs on them, and at a larger scale, complex technologies that take many actors and integrated systems to operate them, such as atomic weapons and drones.

In his essay, Brian Martin, one of the most prolific and thoughtful analysts of technology, warfare, and of projects for peace, draws on psychology, histories of genocide, and science and technology studies to call for a social epistemology of evil technologies that analyzes *and* condemn them. Evil technologies are not an ontological category per se, but in Martin's view, what makes them evil is that they embody the purposeful capacity to harm and maim other humans and the bios writ large.

Thus, the semi-automatic rifle would qualify, even though it might have other potential uses, such as such as an art object or a component of a table. Hatchets, on the other hand, while used to kill and maim, are mainly created to and used for cutting wood for productive (rather than purely pleasurable) purposes, and thus is not the sort of technology that concerns Martin.

Beginning With What Technology Is

The ontological starting point of his essay is compelling. Drawing on science studies, he views all technologies *flexible objects* that might be used in different ways, but insists that that this does not mean that they are morally neutral, such that they take on a moral valence only when they are used. Understanding why and how technologies of evil requires another approach, which is to understand why they were made in the first place. And, Martin is on the mark in asserting that there are fewer scholarly studies of technologies of destruction and harm (my phrase) than there are of technologies deemed to have a positive influence on enabling people to thrive.

As Martin recognizes, we have many studies of the origins and use of technologies for evil purposes (e.g., the machine gun, atomic weapons, drones that deliver weapons, some torture devices). Most tend to tell rich and interesting stories that capture the excitement and problem-solving that go into their development, and either sidestep the moral questions of their development and use, or treat the technologies as perhaps morally difficult but necessary inventions that led to greater efficiencies of killing, and more safety and security for users (Richard Rhodes' Pulitzer-Prize Winning *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1987) and Donald MacKenzie's *Inventing Missile Accuracy* are two examples). There are, however, important exceptions, such as Hugh Gusterson's *Drone: Remote Control Warfare* (2016), and a wide range of blogs that do the work that academics have not done.

The Human Roots of Evil Technology

The starting point for Martin's essay, however, establishes hypotheses about why and how individual people make and use evil technologies that are either untenable, or direct attention to questions that have already been answered. He bases much of his analysis on Bartlett's *The Psychology of Man* (2000), and amplifies two conclusions from the book.

The first is that humans are unique because they are the only animal that attacks its own kind. This is not supported by evidence. Some non-human animals kill members of their own species when they are under threat or as a matter of mating or kin protection, including in situations where parents neglect or kill some of their offspring to ensure that others live. Animals, like humans, can also be made to fight under [human imposed] duress, such as with dog fighting.

Yet humans-as-animals also live in highly complex social systems, in which most of the time, people are not busy killing each other. The same is true of animals: they spend little of their time killing each other. This grand theory of "man" [sic] avoids grappling with the fact that historically, men, particularly young men, have done most of the direct killing, and that to get them to do so, there is a wide range of organizational and social labor that has to be done. In situations where there is little sense of status or material threat, people are, apparently, less likely to attempt to kill each other, unless the killing can be routinized through banality or through concerted social labor to make killing pleasurable or necessary for survival.

[Martin also favorably cites Bartlett's assertion that the "cult of motherhood" and an infatuation with children are somehow related to mass murder or harm to others, a framework that is underdeveloped, to say that least, but wrongly disparaging of mothers' care for survival and thriving of their children.]

Similarly, likening humans to planetary parasites is perhaps less illuminating than understanding which groups of people, at which historical moments, are most implicated in the destruction of life through war and through other means. If we are to understand how technologies associated with evil are deployed, we must take into account this social variation rather than treating it as human nature.

Martin and Bartlett also identify rage, jealousy, fear, excitement, boredom, pleasure, numbness, righteousness, ambivalence, and splitting and dissociation, among others psychological and physical states associated with mass and individual killing. With the exception of compassion and love, killing is probably associated with just about every other feeling that humans have ever categorized.

Peacefulness As an Innovation

It thus raises questions about why tracing affect itself would reveal much about the making of evil technologies, or even their use. Martin's suggestion that we learn more about the people who *don't* kill in situations where others do is a stronger position, and we might avoid starting with interior psychological states as the major reason for these positions, and ask, as Martin does later in the essay, about the social relationships and biographies of people who are non-participants. Religious objectors, for example, are a good starting point.

My own and others' scholarship (Moore 2008) shows that some scientists find excitement and creativity in making weapons, but that during periods of political mobilization against wars, a not insignificant number of scientists mounted opposition to weapons production, based not on their psychologies, but on their relationships to antiwar movements. I suspect that we would learn little about the psychology of evil from finding out more about what motivates these people.

The latter part of the essay is where there are more promising epistemological approaches to how we might understand how technologies embody evil, and to condemn them, starting with what might be called the “commitment to militarism” at a national and transnational level. As a long-time student of war, Martin recognizes that we no longer live in a world in which warfare is that which is legally declared and then legally ended.

We live in a world in which militarized life is normalized, made exciting in mass media, through metaphors such as the “war on...”, through languages of threat and the need for protection that are marshalled by political actors to galvanize hatred, and the use of war technologies on civilians, to name but a few of these tendencies. In the 1980s in the USA and in other countries, worker who produced goods at a steady state faded away, with factories, as a model citizen.

The new model is the soldier who anticipates and prepares for battle through a variety of technologies, including military-derived exercises such as aerobics, Pilates, and boot camps of various kinds, and the drumbeat, in neoliberal countries, of ensuring that each of us is prepared for the upcoming battles we have to fight for ourselves (health, education, children). Leadership around the world that rules by threat and instability, and fires up the furnaces of xenophobia in order to justify the suffering of others must also be understood as a vehicle through which the need for nations to produce evil technologies is normalized.

The Ideas Which Fall Short of the Task

Martin argues that the usual ways that science studies scholars understand technologies—actor-network theory, political economy, and innovation studies—are ill-equipped to understand evil technologies, in part because they rarely condemn them. As a discipline that has historically drawn on the European tradition of dispassionate scholarship, this is in part true.

Innovation studies are particularly pernicious, for the concept can bring forth an Enlightenment optimism about progress that is now connected with entrepreneurial development projects. But among all of these options, it is analysts of political economy who have been most alert to the connections between technologies of killing and destruction and of profit making.

Martin is right, though, in arguing that condemnation is not always at the center of such studies, and nor, perhaps, are facts such as that in the USA, the Department of Defense is the largest employer in the country, or that Israel, Russia, the United States and Great Britain

supply most of the weapons that people around the world use to kill each other. Studies of the workers in most of the production systems would probably turn up little new information about why people are doing what they do: most people take for granted that we need weapons, they are not the direct users of them, they get paid, and they are not in a position to object too strongly.

Martin's Promising Methods

More promising are the social epistemologies that Martin proposes. One is to trace out motivations for making these weapons. Again, the routinization of their creation seems less promising, but the engineers, business leaders, and political figures whose job it is to make existing weapons better at killing and less risky for users might be a place to start. "Studying up" is much harder than studying, say, soldiers or those who work in a bullet factory. But studies that expose the accounts that these people give might also be a means of shining a highly critical light on how it comes to be that we have more and "improved" weapons.

An action research approach is also promising, for it would allow scholars and communities to learn more about technologies and be critical of them. Action research projects have typically focused on health harms from weapons manufacture; other studies might be more focused on the social harms that are caused by things like guns. Studies that trace foods are popular among students and journalists. Genealogies of a given evil technology, which included moral evaluations of the harms that were done as a result of production and use, is also promising.

Martin sounds a pessimistic note throughout the essay, and given the embeddedness of evil technologies in systems ranging from profit making, to racism, to religious prejudice, to environmental destruction (consider military "proving grounds") this is not an unreasonable position.

Yet in the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch killings, the Australian Prime Minister called for a ban on semi-automatic weapons, and legislation has been drafted that will make that happen. Science studies has become a discipline engaged in "making and doing" projects with clear justice aims, rather than a field that imitates the style of neutrality in scientific claim-making. Young people around the world are pleading with those with political power to save the biosphere; I read little about their enthusiasm for war.

Far from being uniform psychological subjects bent on killing, they and people from many other age groups and walks of life, are also moving in this direction. These efforts would be strengthened by the implementation of Martin's epistemological suggestions for how to study and condemn evil technologies, a program that continues his long standing and important analyses of warmaking, peacemaking and technoscience. The essay is thus both timely, and indeed, hopeful.

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