



SERRC

Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>

ISSN: 2471-9560

Refusing Evil by (Sociotechnical) Design (Revised)

Kelly Moore, Loyola University Chicago

Moore, Kelly. "Refusing Evil by (Sociotechnical) Design: A Comment on Martin (Revised)." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8, no. 4 (2019): 19-23.

Short url: <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-483> (provided by WordPress)

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 were injured while attending church. And in 2011, 77 young people were killed in Norway at a summer holiday camp. The worshippers in South Carolina 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. 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 purposes, and thus are not the sort of technology that concerns Martin.

Beginning With What Technology Is

The (de) 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 in their formation, taking on moral valence only when they are used, as other approaches insist. For Martin, understanding 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.

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) tend to tell rich 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—particularly in the field of science studies—have not done in making plain the harms that inhere in and are produced by particular kinds of technologies.

The Human Roots of Evil Technology

Yet the causal starting point for Martin's essay—how we get these technologies in the first place—relies on 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.

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 only some people—men, particularly young men—have done most of the direct killing of other humans, 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' role in the survival and thriving of their children.]

Martin proposes, too, that humans are planetary parasites, a claim that is perhaps less illuminating than understanding which groups of people, at which historical moments, are most implicated in the destruction of life through technological means. If we are to understand how technologies associated with evil are made and deployed, we must take into account of social variation rather than treating it as the result of human nature.

Martin does consider human variation in the essay, identifying rage, jealousy, fear, excitement, boredom, pleasure, numbness, righteousness, ambivalence, and splitting and dissociation, among others psychological and physical states, as 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. Martin and Bartlett conclude from this that humans are essentially killing animals.

To conclude that these varied emotions are the result of some kind of internal logic of the human animal is indeed one conclusion that could be drawn. But another is to understand the social situations that produce these feelings, and perhaps even more helpfully, to follow Martin's suggestion that we learn more about the people who *don't* kill in situations where others do.

This method would avoid starting with interior psychological states and enable attention to the social relationships and biographies of people who are non-participants. Religious objectors, for example, might be a good starting point. My own and others' scholarship (Moore 2008) shows that some scientists find excitement, pride, and creativity in making weapons, but that during periods of political mobilization against wars, a not insignificant number of scientists have 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 *production of evil technologies* from finding out more about the interior mental states of these people.

Exploring the Figure of the Citizen-Soldier

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. What might be called the "commitment to militarism" at a national and transnational level is a promising starting point. As a long-time student of war, Martin recognizes that we no longer live in a world in which warfare simply legally declared and then legally ended.

Instead, 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 that are visible in many places across the globe. The at-risk citizen, called to prepare for battles for jobs, education, health, and many other things, has emerged as a dominant cultural form.

The normalization of citizen soldiering, argues Cowan (2008), is part and parcel of the drumbeat, in neoliberal countries, of ensuring living with insecurity. Outside the economic realm, leadership around the world, most notably in the USA, rules by threat and instability, and fires up the furnaces of xenophobia in order to justify the suffering of others; these broader social processes must also be understood as part of the context in which produce evil technologies is normalized.

Martin is not only interested in how and why evil technologies are made and deployed, but in arguing against the usual ways that science studies scholars understand technologies (actor-network theory, political economy, and innovation studies), which he deems 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.

Innovating Our Way to Peace?

Innovation studies are particularly pernicious, for the concept can bring forth an Enlightenment optimism about progress that is now connected with technologically-based entrepreneurial projects and their spin-offs. “Innovative technologies” such as more efficient weapons, can get morally folded into an echo chamber that limits critique.

Of the three ways of thinking about technologies in science studies, analysts of the political economy of science have been perhaps the most attentive to the connections between technologies of killing and destruction, and of profit making. Martin is right in arguing that condemnation is not always at the center of any of these schools of technological analysis, 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.

It is worth repeating that 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.

The social epistemologies that Martin proposes to show the existence of evil technologies and to oppose them are excellent and particularly promising for students to undertake. One is to trace out motivations for making these weapons. The routinization of their creation seems a less promising starting point, but how engineers, business leaders, and political figures come to take up these jobs, and whether they have been exposed to alternatives, is a promising approach. “Studying up” is much harder than studying soldiers or those who work in a bullet factory.

Studies that expose the biographies of weapons creators might shine a highly critical light on the normalization of this kind of work. A second proposed method, action research, 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 making guns, not only using them. Finally, give “tracing” projects, such as where foods come from are popular among students, journalists, and general audiences, 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. None of these epistemologies necessitates knowing about the internal mental states of individuals.

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.

Conclusion

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. Martin’s field of 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 bios; 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.

Contact details: kmoore11@luc.edu

References

- Cowan, Deborah. *Military Workfare: The Soldier as Citizen in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.
- Gusterson, Hugh. *Drone: Remote Control Warfare*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016.
- MacKenzie, Donald. *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Study of Missile Guidance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.
- Moore, Kelly. *Disrupting Science: Social Movements, American Scientists and the Politics of the Military, 1955-1975*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Rhodes, Richard. *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.