

# Book Review: Evil

by Blog Admin

October 2, 2012

*In contrast to traditional systems of thought which regarded evil as a supernatural force that explained human misfortune, Michel Wieviorka develops a sociological analysis of evil phenomena. His aim is to explain evil, to reveal its social, political, and cultural sources, and to clarify the processes through which the present-day forms of evil – terrorism, violence, racism, and active hatred – are constituted. Jo Taylor finds that in this highly topical and engaging book.*



**Evil. Michel Wieviorka. Polity Press. May 2012.**

## Find this book:

In 2008, Michel Wieviorka published a book called *Nine Lessons in Sociology* (*Neuf Leçons de Sociologie*), part of which included a section on the sociology of good and evil. When Wieviorka was approached regarding a translation into English, the concept was for a book solely focussed on the concept of evil. What was written – you might have guessed – is the book in focus here: *Evil*.

Wieviorka, a French sociologist noted for his work on violence, terrorism, and social movements, outlines his arguments clearly in the introduction to *Evil*, proposing that cruelty and social problems used to be only the domain of religion. Now, the articulation and explanation of these problems falls under the remit of the social sciences.

*Evil* has come along at a very interesting time. Some thinkers, such as Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*) and Sam Harris (*The Moral Landscape*) have proposed that morality does not need to be based on religion. They might argue that human morality is born through reciprocal altruism, Social Learning Theory or Vicarious reinforcement. For unfamiliar readers, they would put the emphasis on society and personal benefit. So, upon being nice to others one might realise that this behaviour makes the world easier to live in. Children might see the benefits of empathy or kindness through the actions of those around them being rewarded through reciprocal kindness or empathy, and so, start to exhibit them too. To throw Lamarckian evolution into the mix, those who are moral or kind alter their own biology through altered activity of neurotransmitters and hormones. As they receive benefits through their positive actions they have sufficient resources to make babies, and pass their predisposition to kindness onto their offspring in the form of (for example) increased sensitivity to Oxytocin or a higher tolerance to the effects of Cortisol. However, all of these 'social arguments' are still contentious, with large chunks of people around the world believing that morality has at least developed from religious reference points, and others preferring to leave the explanation of morality to those of faith and religion.

Wieviorka starts *Evil* by justifying why morality and evil fall within the territory of the social sciences. In three distinct sections he then builds on this by arguing that it is the duty of the sciences to adopt and analyse these issues as social issues. First, Wieviorka elaborates on how social norms have changed and violence has become a taboo in modern western society. Wieviorka does not just approach the process of violence becoming a taboo in modern society from a historical perspective; his narrative is generously laced with philosophical points about how society relates to the suffering of victims of violent events and the wider impact that our way of treating those who have seen violence might have on future violence. Which, for his

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purposes provides a much deeper and more interesting discussion on the way that the place of violence as evil has changed in society.

Next Wieviorka focuses on examples of evil that science can analyse, in the forms of global terrorism and the return of racism. These topics are extremely relevant and 'of the time' so the lessons a reader might take away are directly useful and accessible. They are both issues which people could easily distance themselves from, excusing those that commit these kind of acts as a 'wacky/crazy/evil few'. By tackling these topics with the ever present sprinkling of useful sociological references, Wieviorka allows the reader to feel involved with the issues (and maybe even a bit humbled) without resorting to the sensationalist images that the media use to tempt our attention. It also could be noted that the issues of racism and terrorism are often associated with mystical/religious groups, and so by using them as examples Wieviorka preemptively deprives critics of reference points.

*Evil* finishes with a commentary on whether the social sciences should focus on the micro or the macro when investigating the subject of evil. The arguments presented across these three sections are well written and translated and it would be only a small stretch for a general reader to access the material; surely a high compliment for any academic text. Many readers may find this final section the most striking; the exploration of evil through worldly examples was particularly useful. The climax of the book focuses on the expanding areas of analysis for the social sciences, and the descriptions of how institutions and individuals have taken on different meanings and importance over the last two centuries is also a worthy read.

While debating whether to focus on the micro or macro when analysing evil, Wieviorka looks at the concept of the Subject and how it has developed in the social sciences. He takes us on a tour of classic sociologists and describes how the concept of 'the Subject as an actor in their own life' falls in and out of favour across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is to be expected with sociology being caught between the importance of the micro and that of the macro. What is interesting during this intellectual meandering is the way Wieviorka weaves in mention of debates on dualism and free will to give the chapter extra depth. A running theme throughout the section comparing individuals and institutions against analysis of evil is the way Wieviorka makes readers consider whether it is the top-down actions of institutions that creates evil, or more importantly, the bottom-up receipt of oppression by subjects (and the consequent creation of victims) which we then perceive as forming an evil act.

Wieviorka has explored the ways in which sociology can analyse evil and has summarised some strong arguments for the need of the social sciences to focus on morality and evil. Wieviorka built from the bottom but my feeling at times during reading was that the author did not advance his ideas fully, although we can appreciate that he wanted to include every reader and did not want to lose readers to scepticism early on in their reading. Certainly, his time spent on providing context and philosophical depth was highly interesting and useful. A follow up article or book which takes the ideas within *Evil* further would be most welcome.

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**Jo Taylor** is a Teach First Ambassador, educational consultant and social entrepreneur. He teaches Psychology and Sociology A level, mentors and coaches adults and children, writes on education and social innovation and has an academic interest in using Psychology and technology to improve education. He is currently developing a pilot for a free educational website to reward students and increase social validation and parental involvement in education ([walldisplay.org](http://walldisplay.org)). [Read reviews by Jo](#).

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