

Hessel J. Zondag

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2018

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19468>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Zondag, Hessel J.: Trauma and Conformity: Psychology in The Act Of Killing and Das radikal Böse.
In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*. Trauma, Memory and Religion, Jg. 4 (2018), Nr. 1, S. 35–46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19468>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/article/view/91

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Trauma and Conformity

Psychology in THE ACT OF KILLING and DAS RADIKAL BÖSE

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the psychological aspects of two documentaries about violence: *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, GB/DK/NO 2012) and *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE (THE RADICAL EVIL, Stefan Ruzowitzky, DE/AT 2013)*, specifically the concepts of trauma and conformity. Both perspectives are revealing and provide insight and structure. But question marks hang over both concepts because they hide important elements of the violence described in the documentaries. In the case of *THE ACT OF KILLING* the difference between perpetrators and victims should not be neglected; in the case of *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* conformity should be recognised as not simply a moral failing.

KEYWORDS

Trauma, conformity, violence

BIOGRAPHY

Hessel J. Zondag studied cultural psychology in Nijmegen and was lecturer and researcher at the University of Tilburg and the Radboud University Nijmegen. His research and publications deal with the psychological consequences of individualisation processes, the meaning of religion for personal well-being, and religion and psychology in the visual arts, literature and film.

The documentaries *THE ACT OF KILLING* (Joshua Oppenheimer, DK/NO/GB 2012) and *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE (THE RADICAL EVIL, Stefan Ruzowitzky DE/AT 2013)* are about mass killing, a form of violence in which well-armed and efficiently organised perpetrators kill helpless victims on a large scale.¹ Frequently, perpetrators and victims confront each other directly during such slaughter, which might take place in the context of war, civil war, revolution or a coup d'état. *THE ACT OF KILLING* is about the mass killings that occurred in 1965 and 1966 in Indonesia after the alleged coup by the Partai Komunis Indonesia (Communist

1 De Swaan 2014.

Party of Indonesia). *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* deals with the large-scale murder of Jews in Eastern Europe by German *Einsatzgruppen* (special task forces) during the Second World War.

Both directors, Joshua Oppenheimer (*THE ACT OF KILLING*) and Stefan Ruzowitzky (*DAS RADIKAL BÖSE*), direct attention to people who were guilty of involvement in these mass killings, men who were perpetrators. In this article I look at the psychological perspective adopted by the directors, an exploration that is easier for *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* than for *THE ACT OF KILLING* as Ruzowitzky makes explicit use of social psychology. The concepts of conformity and obedience and the bystander effect are the point of departure for his film. In the last 70 years much social-psychological research has investigated the destructive attitudes of so many individuals during the Second World War. The psychological perspective adopted by Oppenheimer is instead implicit as he explores the idea of trauma. His approach is to describe the actions of only one, although the most prominent one, of those portrayed as perpetrators. Ruzowitzky, by contrast, aims to provide insight into the actions of all the perpetrators.

The psychological analysis of *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* is therefore more elaborate than that of *THE ACT OF KILLING*. Moreover, *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* is more fitting for such analysis than is *THE ACT OF KILLING* because of its explicit use of concepts derived from social psychology to investigate mass killing in the Second World War. The trauma idea is only peripheral to *THE ACT OF KILLING*, both in the documentary itself and in the reflections of its director.

The approaches of the directors are dissimilar. In *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* the director seeks to explain how the killing was able to take place. How did ordinary men become mass murderers? What led them to kill men, women and children who had no role in the military hostilities? *THE ACT OF KILLING* focuses on the life of a mass murderer after the large-scale slaughter. How does this man look back at that period, which at the time the documentary was made was already 40 years in the past? *THE ACT OF KILLING* is about how a mass murderer views himself; *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* is about how someone becomes a mass murderer.

Both perspectives are revelatory and provide insight and structure. But question marks hang over both stories, for while they disclose they simultaneously conceal. That dual character is inevitable, I propose, as every approach, including the filmic, requires a certain perspective. And each perspective discloses and conceals.

THE ACT OF KILLING AND TRAUMA

THE ACT OF KILLING looks back to the mass killings in Indonesia in the mid 1960s. These murders began after an alleged communist coup d'état. The documentary presents us with a number of murderers who relate their stories about the

killings. We listen to them, but we also see how they re-enact episodes from that earlier period. The spectators are shown how these perpetrators intimidated their anxious and helpless victims, how they interrogated them and how they strangled them with iron wire. In these re-enactments the murderers play both perpetrators and victims.

ANWAR CONGO

One of the perpetrators stands out. Anwar Congo attracts attention because of his complicated character and because viewers will be ambivalent towards him. At the time of the killing, in which he was very active, Congo, who had been a small-time criminal before the coup, was in his twenties. Now he suffers as a result of his past actions. He is both a brutish and unscrupulous murderer, and a charming man. The audience is captivated when he has mercy on young, still-downy duck with a broken leg and warns his grandchildren to be careful with this duck. Completely bizarre is the scene in which he cherishingly takes his grandchildren onto his lap to show them a video with re-enactments of the events of the 1960s. The grandchildren see how their grandfather, made up as a severely wounded victim, is cruelly interrogated. But Anwar Congo is also terrifying when he demonstrates how he used iron wire to strangle the people he had arrested. He killed thousands in this way. And the spectator is unlikely to feel compassion when they see him as an old man walking or, better, lumbering down the stairs, for now he suffers as a result of his past. When he leaves the location where he had created so many victims, he vomits, nauseated by his actions and by himself.

The director portrays Anwar Congo as traumatised but does not use the term *trauma* anywhere in the movie. In interviews, however, Oppenheimer has repeatedly remarked that Congo is traumatised, as for example in a conversation with the *Hollywood Reporter*. In this interview Oppenheimer also relays the meaning of the re-enactment scenes for Anwar Congo. He refers to Anwar Congo's "horrifying and traumatic set of memories" and notes:

But for Anwar, I think the real story of why he wants to make these fiction scenes about what he's done is more complicated. I think he's trying to work through his pain and remorse – and his disgust in himself. He just didn't have the language to put it that way. He's trying to do it by transforming this horrifying and traumatic set of memories, into contained ideally heroic film scenes – to replace this miasmic, unspeakable horror, which is haunting his dreams.²

It is risky to diagnose at a distance for one too quickly runs to stereotypes. But the images that are shown suggest we see Anwar Congo as traumatised. He

2 Brzeski 2013.

suffers as a result of his memories of the slaughter, with the dead occupying his mind. The victims appear in his nightmares. He sees them lying with open eyes staring up at him. For years he lived in a fuddle, intoxicated by alcohol and drugs, his way of attempting to cope with the dark side of life. Now he asks himself whether he has sinned. When he takes on the part of his victims in the role-play, he wonders whether they met with the same fate as he in the re-enacted scenes, whether they felt themselves as humiliated as he and whether he took away their dignity. Although role-playing is “nothing more” than acting, a well-staged play can provide an overwhelming representation of the past.³

Anwar Congo shows many signs of trauma. We can ask questions about Anwar Congo and his suffering which cannot be asked of many others who are traumatised by their pasts. We might deem such questions inappropriate, even impertinent. The question is, are we to be pleased that Anwar Congo suffers now as a result of his past? That question stems from our knowing him to be guilty of murder – and what kind of world is this if murderers do not suffer for their actions?

To explore this subject I will first present a short exposition of the concept of trauma. Then I will discuss the position of perpetrators and victims in traumatic events. Finally, I indicate how we should look at the traumas of perpetrators such as Anwar Congo.

TRAUMA

Trauma can be defined in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.⁴ For convenience here I use simply the term “trauma”. We can diagnose trauma in light of symptoms such as the repeated replaying of memories, the experience of disturbing dreams that make reference to the sufferer’s past and intense negative emotions suffered over a period of at least one month.

For this diagnosis such symptoms must be the result of an event in which the sufferer was exposed to death, including the threat of death or severe wounding, or sexual violence. The patient may have been the victim or may have witnessed someone in their direct environment become a victim, perhaps a partner, relative or friend. So when the sufferer’s trauma resulted from having someone very near to him as victim.

This definition is derived from DSM-5, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, an all-encompassing handbook published by the American Psychiatric Association, a professional association of psychiatrists and psychologists, which has appeared since the 1950s. The DSM is regularly reissued. The current issue, from 2013, is the fifth edition, hence known as DSM-5. The manual provides the leading classification of psychiatric symptoms and has a central role within mental

3 Scheff 1979.

4 American Psychiatric Association 2013.

health care. It summarises current thinking on trauma, and I therefore use it as point of departure for my description of this phenomenon. There is a lot of criticism about the use of the DSM, but to go into this extends the scope of this article.⁵

We should note that the DSM's description of trauma refers not only to events that have happened directly to the patient but also to events in which the patient is only indirectly involved, for example, as a witness to a trauma-causing event or as a close friend to someone who has been affected by severe misfortune. The concept of trauma is applied broadly here, an approach also adopted with the contention that role in the original incident is not a determining factor in the diagnosis of trauma – both perpetrator and victim can suffer as a result of events of the past; the sufferings of each are not distinct.

PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS:

DOES THEIR SUFFERING MEAN THE SAME THING?

If both perpetrator and victim suffer as a result of their pasts, is their suffering identical? There is no doubt that Anwar Congo suffers, but does his suffering have the same meaning as that of his victims? On this point the rough-woven understanding of trauma and violent events proves inadequate, unable to provide careful and accurate analysis of this phenomenon. The positions of perpetrator and victim are, in fact, radically different. The victim suffers as a result of the misfortune they were forced to undergo; the perpetrator suffers as a result of inflicting harm. This difference cannot be conjured away. Reflection on trauma must not focus too much on symptoms, paying little or no attention to the role of the person – perpetrator or victim – concerned in the original incident.

Previous editions of the DSM provided more opportunities to distinguish between perpetrator and victim. In these versions helplessness is mentioned as characteristic of a traumatising event. The inability to act in a situation that requires action for self-preservation is found pre-eminently among victims, who had no choice. By contrast, perpetrators remained “in control”. The concept of helplessness can be applied to distinguish between perpetrators and victims even within the terms established by the DSM, at least in its earlier editions.

Congo suffers; he is traumatised by his role as a perpetrator. Should we not be glad that he is suffering? He killed on a large scale. Let us imagine that the responsibly for such killing left no impression on the perpetrators, that they carried out their actions without any negative emotional effect. Would we not understand that response as unbearable indifference to human life? Such nonchalance is seen in *THE ACT OF KILLING*, in a scene in which one of the perpetrators tells of the rape of young girls. Forty years later he still enjoys the memory, relating that the experience was “heaven” for him.

5 See Dehue 2008 and Dehue 2014 for a critique of the DSM.

In *THE ACT OF KILLING* we see that Anwar Congo's suffering takes the form of awareness of having been morally evil. He asks himself whether he has sinned or has robbed people of their dignity. He tries to imagine himself experiencing the suffering he caused for others. He even goes one step further: he empathises with his victims. Many of those who have carried out such actions are well able to imagine the suffering they have inflicted on others. The man who continues to enjoy the memory of the rapes he committed 40 years earlier says that the abuse was like hell for the girls. He knows what they felt, but it does not interest him. For Congo the situation is different. Unlike so many perpetrators, he empathises with his former victims. This empathy can lead to remorse, a sense of guilt and subsequently a confession of guilt.

This guilt can generate a type of suffering that therapy cannot alleviate. To help people who are experiencing this kind of suffering, they must be allowed to confess and do penance, for example by admitting their guilt directly to their victims and their victims' surviving relatives. To the victim such a confession can serve as a recognition of the pain they endure.

Nonetheless confessing guilt and penance is rare. Only a fraction of perpetrators ever admit to have done wrong.⁶ Estimates for the percentage of perpetrators who suffer as a result of inflicting violence vary, with some estimates rising to 20 per cent.⁷ But of this estimated 20 per cent who suffer from nightmares, from hearing the anxious cries of their victims, from physical symptoms, all symptoms of trauma, only a very small proportion ever show repentance. The suffering of the perpetrators appears to accommodate very well with a lack of awareness of having sided with immorality. Very seldom do perpetrators experience their own suffering in moral terms, let alone confess their guilt.

DAS RADIKAL BÖSE AND CONFORMITY

Director Stefan Ruzowitzky makes explicit use of social psychology in his documentary *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE*, for he even bases his movie on the results of this branch of psychology. He shows classic social-psychological experiments to cast light on the genocide committed in the Second World War by the *Einsatzgruppen*, special troops active on the Eastern Front between 1941 and 1943. The experiments are found in all handbooks of social psychology, evidence that their results belong to the core of this discipline. Moreover, these experiments have been carried out repeatedly.⁸ In this case the reproach that psychology often jumps to far-reaching conclusions on the basis of limited empirical research cannot be sustained.

6 Baumeister 1997; De Swaan 2014.

7 Lifton 1986.

8 Hock 2006.

The experiments shown by Ruzowitzky have one common characteristic. All of them demonstrate how social pressure drives people to formulate opinions and act in the presence of others differently from how they would express themselves and behave when alone. They show how social pressure can bring people to commit mass murder at times of war. They demonstrate how individuals can become murderers through the presence of other individuals and through orders they receive.

The men who killed were “ordinary”. They were policemen redeployed to fight in the war and soldiers of the *Wehrmacht*, the German army. We have no reason to expect them to be more readily violent towards civilians, a violence that was expected of members of the SS. (We know now that SS soldiers also did not differ greatly from a cross-section of the German population. The similarities between SS troops and the modal German population were considerably greater than the dissimilarities.)⁹

The next section of this article deals with three social-psychological experiments that according to Ruzowitzky explain the killing carried out by *Ein-satzgruppen*: the conformity experiments of Solomon Asch, the obedience experiments of Stanley Milgram, and the bystander-effect experiments of John Darley and Bibb Latané. I conclude with a reflection on the explanation for the killing given by Ruzowitzky.

CONFORMITY

In the conformity experiments carried out by Asch, participants had to judge the length of lines.¹⁰ The experiments were performed by groups of eight persons, of whom seven were actors and only one a real test subject. This one person supposed that all participants were test subjects. The participants received a card with a single line on it, and were then shown a card with three lines, of which one was the same length as the line on the first card. The subjects had to determine which of the three lines was the same length as the line on the first card. The seven actors unanimously pointed to the wrong line. What would the test subject do?

The most important result of the experiment was that many test subjects accommodated themselves to the evidently wrong judgement of the others in their group. They adjusted their own view to the views of the others. What is less well known, however, is that about 60 per cent did not conform. We do not know anything of the personal characteristics of these last individuals, just we know nothing of those who did adapt to conform.

There was no explicit coercion in Asch’s experiments. The only pressure came from the presence of people who judged incorrectly, with whom the test subject formed a temporary group during the experiment.

9 De Swaan 2014.

10 Asch 1951.

OBEEDIENCE

In addition to the conformity experiment carried out by Asch, the documentary shows Milgram's obedience experiment, the results of which caused great turmoil.¹¹ The tests were devised as a means to establish why during the Second World War so many men had been prepared to commit mass killings. How easily do people obey and how far will they go to follow orders? How readily or how hesitantly will people comply with orders to kill? Milgram began his experiments just after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, which had brought these burning questions to the attention of a larger public.

In its basic form Milgram's experiment proceeds as follows. Three participants each adopt a separate role: the test subject plays the role of teacher; a co-worker plays the pupil; and another co-worker leads the experiment and gives the instructions. The teacher does not know that the pupil is also a co-worker and supposes that the pupil is also a test subject. The teacher gives assignments that the pupil must carry out; if the pupil fails, the teacher must administer a punishment in the form of an electric shock. After each failure, the voltage of the electric pulse is increased. If the teacher hesitates to carry out the punishment, the leader of the experiment states that the teacher has no option other than to continue.

What made the experiment controversial was that many participants were prepared to continue to give electric shocks even at 450 volts, a fatal level. The proportion of people willing to administer this value even reached 65 per cent on occasion. Before Milgram started the experiments, he had asked a number of experts to predict what percentage of participants would be willing to administer the maximum voltage. Their highest estimate was three per cent. In some instances, that figure was multiplied twentyfold. Yet many other participants refused to continue and even withdrew from the experiment. This aspect of the data received less attention.

Whether the participant obeyed or refused could be dependent on attributes of authority they encountered. When the leader of the experiment wore a white coat, he was more frequently obeyed than when he wore everyday clothes. In one version of the experiment a fourth role was introduced, that of assistant to the leader. When assistant and leader appeared to differ on whether the experiment should be continued, the number of test subjects prepared to carry out the punishment decreased almost to zero.

We know nothing of the characteristics of those who did not conform, as was also the case for Asch's experiment. The researcher's purpose was to investigate the impact and power of orders. The experiments were not designed to establish personal characteristics that might be associated with refusal or obedience.

11 Milgram 1974.

BYSTANDER EFFECT

A third social-psychological phenomenon addressed in DAS RADIKAL BÖSE concerns the failure to respond when another individual is in danger or suffering, behaviour that has been termed the “bystander effect”. This behaviour has been explored in various forms, in particular in the experiments of Darley and Latané, which sought insight into what people do when they detect a threat.¹² The main purpose of this research was to detect how people were influenced by other individuals’ failure to act. The experiment followed the murder of a young woman in New York in 1964. Kitty Genovese was raped and killed in the street at night. More than 35 persons saw or heard something, but nobody alerted the police. Why did they fail to act?

In one of these experiments, the test subjects were confronted with signs of danger: their room was filled with smoke, which suggests fire. Participants who were alone in this room responded on average in four seconds. If they were together with people who did not react, actors naturally, it was 20 seconds on average before they themselves reacted. It thus took five times longer for them to respond to a danger when they were in the presence of passive others. In another version of this experiment, someone appeared to become unwell. Seventy per cent of the test subjects offered help if they were alone with the person who became unwell. If they were together with others who did not help, only 40 percent offered assistance. In short, when people are alone they respond more actively to signs of danger that might cause suffering than when they are in the presence of others who remain passive.

In Ruzowitzky’s documentary the images of the experiments are effectively interwoven with images drawn from letters written by military men in which they described the horror of killing and / or attempted to justify their deeds; with comments from experts such as Benjamin Frencz, lead prosecutor in the post-war trial of members of the *Einsatzgruppen*, and Christopher Browning, author of an academic study of one of those *Einsatzgruppen*; and with the narratives of witnesses of these massacres, Ukrainian villagers who had seen Germans take their Jewish neighbours off to be killed.¹³

CONFORMITY AS FORCE OF EVIL

DAS RADIKAL BÖSE is a product of the anti-authoritarian atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s. It assumes that those who do not conform, obey orders, or let themselves not be guided by the initiatives of others will not commit genocide. People – men – who act autonomously without being influenced by situational pressure will not become mass murderers. The documentary suggests a one-

¹² Latané/Darley 1970.

¹³ Browning 1992.

to-one relationship between a certain social-psychological profile and morally desirable behaviour, between autonomy and acting humanely, between sensitivity to social pressure and a readiness to commit murder.

The experiments shown in the movie were used in explanations of the genocide carried out during the Second World War. Yet there is also much which is not explained by these experiments. We do not know about the personalities of those who refused to kill (only a few military men refused to participate in the executions). What were the life experiences of those who proved more, or less, susceptible to social pressure? Those who killed were not robots, responding as if machines, as Abram De Swaan demonstrated in his work on genocide.¹⁴ Drawing from Milgram's obedience experiments, De Swaan concludes that we are not able to explain who might make an unwilling, indifferent or willing executioner, or in other words, who might react with resignation, aversion or delight at the thought of killing. Our ignorance should not be read as a reproach of experimental social psychology, which has brought us new insight into the forces active in social situations in various forms. In these studies, however, everything that suggests "conformity" is regarded as an evil.

But is conformity always evil? Conformity is firmly rooted in the human species and has brought great advantages.¹⁵ Humans are basically social beings and they must rely on co-operation with others to survive. They must therefore continually orient themselves on their fellow humans. We have good reason to look again at the bystander effect. The experiments show how strongly the demeanour of others influences one's own behaviour. For those who are sceptical, these experiments merely illustrate human docility or – more cynically – the human inclination to servitude. These experiments also demonstrate, however, how people rely on the opinions and actions of others in creating their own views and in determining their own actions. They show that people strive for consensus and co-operation, a co-operation they need if they are to survive.

Conformity has powerful positive functions. Some people are unbearable both for themselves and for others, if they are not limited by some conformity. Conformity certainly does not always end in disaster, and non-conformity, in turn, does not guarantee a good result. This reading is neglected in *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE*. Admittedly, we might wonder if it is fair to demand the director relate both sides: a documentary that lack a clear perspective because it wishes to discuss everything loses its power.

Yet what would have been the message of *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* if the documentary had dealt with Anders Breivik? In July 2011 Breivik carried out an attack in which he killed 77 people. Breivik was a lone wolf. He did not kill in the service

14 De Swaan 2014.

15 Coultas/Van Leeuwen 2015.

of any regime other than the regime that he had established for himself. Breivik withdrew from social pressure and murdered. Does the killing carried out by Breivik suggest that social pressure can also be valuable and has the power to channel certain behaviours.

TRANSGRESSING PSYCHOLOGY

In this article I have discussed the psychological perspectives in two documentaries about extensive and well-organised violence against defenceless people. *THE ACT OF KILLING* is about trauma; *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* is about conformity. These perspectives are applied to the actions of the perpetrators and reveal what might occur before a mass killing and what the consequences are. They elucidate what makes individuals mass murderers and what their killing can mean for the remainder of their lives.

The adoption of these perspectives also hides however, certain crucial issues from view. The use of the concept of trauma blurs the distinction between perpetrator and victim, while the concept of conformity is employed such that its potentially beneficial functions are concealed.

In both cases the use of psychological concepts needs interpretation that extends beyond psychology. We require a more normative reading that indicates that on essential points the trauma of the perpetrators is incompatible with the trauma of the victims. We also require an interpretation that points out that conformity as such is not necessarily unwelcome, but that it sometimes has undesirable consequences.

Judging an action as conformist or non-conformist in a social-psychological sense is not the same as judging whether that action is unjust or just. What is desirable is determined from a substantive, normative position. Here we can turn to one of the experts in *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE*, priest Patrick Desbois, who does his utmost to record the graves of the Jewish victims of the *Einsatzgruppen* in the Ukraine. Desbois suggests that the moment people claim to be superior to others can be regarded as the first step towards the destruction of those considered inferior. Those who claim their own humanity to be superior may then deny any human status to those that they deem inferior, and if they are not human, they can be destroyed. Much social psychological research confirms this suggestions by Desbois.¹⁶

Declaring others to be inferior can be a prelude to the destruction of these others. Do we not therefore have good reason to encourage conformity to the recognition of the equality of all peoples?

16 Smith/Mackie 2000.

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