

Review: Missing: Persons and Politics

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Jenny Edkins. *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. 280 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-5029-7.

Mass atrocities cause vast numbers of people to go missing – as a consequence of chaos, but also as a matter of design and strategy. The International Commission on Missing Persons recorded 40,000 missing as a result of the Yugoslav wars, of whom 14,000 have yet to be forensically traced. The dictatorship in Argentina, according to human rights organizations, “disappeared” more than 30,000 of its opponents over seven years. In interviews with people who lived in societies where such acts took place, “the missing” are never far away. Yet this study of the consequences of people going missing is a powerful appeal not to treat “the missing” or “the disappeared” as a de-individualized, calculable group. Across eight chapters and a range of twentieth and twenty-first century case studies, Edkins writes against the politics of number and category. Each missing person, she argues, should instead be seen as an individual, irreplaceable within their unique web of human ties. Statistically, “the missing” can be accounted for to satisfaction; as human absences in the lives of others, they never can.

Missing unifies several levels of analysis, from the extreme to the everyday. Most of the chapters address war and conflict: the millions of refugees displaced during and after the Second World War in Europe; soldiers from the World Wars’ missing in action or after capture, including those lost in the First World War trenches and the Slovenian Home Guardsmen handed over to the Partisans; those disappeared for political reasons during Argentina’s “dirty war”; the victims of 9/11 in New York and the 7/7 bombings in London. But there is also discussion of those who go missing individually and voluntarily, and the conflict surrounding relatives’ rights to know what has happened versus a person’s right to disappear.

Edkins not only documents the experiences of those suffering unresolved loss and the practices of searching for the missing, but also carries out, through these examples, a wider intervention into how we think and write about politics. Her central concept is the idea of the “person-as-such,” which is revealed by repeatedly demonstrating how bureaucratic or politically-driven practices of classifying, counting, tracing and memorializing the missing have clashed with loved ones’ demands to seek and remember the person-as-such, a particular person’s unsubstitutable being. Among many examples is the case of Anthony Fatayi-Williams, a young man killed in the bus bombing at Tavistock Square, whose mother refused to apply for flat-rate “criminal injuries” compensation for his death: “if she hadn’t applied through the formal bureaucracy, then it could not even recognize her existence” (10). Once the

person-as-such has been fully articulated, Edkins draws out deeper political insights, alluding to how the person-as-such is lost in the contemporary job market, in the economy, in humanitarian aid and in parliamentary democracy. “[O]rdinary politics and market economics”, she observes, “rely on substitutability: we have a politics that misses the person, a politics of the what, not the who” (emphasis original, 9).

Identifying the “person-as-such” also enables us – that is, the educated, engaged Westerners who are Edkins’s “we” – to be conscious of “the unmissed,” those whose fates are rarely part our discussions. Indeed, Edkins argues, it forces us to do so. Edkins evokes the loss of a loved one but then asks, echoing John Donne (“no man is an island, entire of itself”): “is it possible, if we are thinking in terms of the ties that compose us or the encounters that make us who we are, [...] to draw a line around those whose loss affects our sense of who we are and those whose disappearance has no impact on us” (10)? Why should we “speak of the disappeared in Argentina” but not “of the disappearances in much more contemporary Pakistan” (10)? To recognize the uncounted and unmissed – Judith Butler’s “lives that cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living” – is imperative (quoted, 10): “a book on the politics of the missing could be deemed incomplete without some consideration of [...] the person who doesn’t even begin to count” (11). For those, such as the author and this reviewer, whose “heritage [is] arguably grounded in the reduction of the majority of *persons-as-such* to the status of nothing but objects,” to do so is especially important (11).

Edkins is a thoughtful, sensitive writer, whose arguments are informed by post-structuralist thought but whose language is accessible to students, community practitioners, and specialists alike. Her book’s relevance for oral historians is strong. Its case studies have been or will be the subjects of much oral history research. More fundamentally, awareness of what Edkins refers to as the person-as-such is the very basis of the discipline’s claim to knowledge and validity. Quoting Vivian Gornick’s essay on posters of the missing after 9/11, Edkins writes of the “narrative drive” of loved ones, who use individual detail to contest the deindividuation and political appropriation of mass victimhood (28). Adriana Cavarero’s writing on the narrated self – arguing “that it is through telling the stories of our lives to each other that we find our uniqueness and express our desire for some form of unity as a singular being” – appears late in the book as a philosophical pillar (191). The centrality of narrative in Edkins’ approach points to a pathway for writing oral history approaches into political science and International Relations, even though oral historians may well conceive of narration and storytelling as more than “affirmation”: what about when the telling of one person’s story undermines the story for another, as for instance has been the case in some testimonies of forced adoption when adult children have unwillingly been made aware of their biological parents’ identities (192)? An overall message extractable from *Missing*, offering a way to resist the political objectification of the person,

nonetheless stands: that a politics of the person-as-such must be grounded in the (intersubjective) telling of stories.