

Missing: Persons and politics

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Abstract

This manuscript is a review of the book *Missing: Persons and Politics* by Jenny Edkins and published by Cornell University Press in 2011. It draws on two earlier reviews in providing an overview of the Edkins contribution to an area of research notable by the paucity of attention paid to it by scholars' worldwide.

Note: As this was read on an e-reader, no page references are possible for quotations.

Book review

Edkins writes, "Missing and the disappeared are different from the dead". This book explains why, taking a considered look at personal and broader systems issues that contribute to making it so. In my view, it makes an outstanding contribution as a fine piece of scholarship and as a seminal contribution to understanding the complexity of missingness. It is carefully crafted, considerate of the need for rigor in representing extensive research with deft facility with the written word. She clearly privileges the unique place of each individual and conveys understanding of the complexity of the social world. Edkins' position is clear, "a focus on missing persons demands a focus on the specific, the particular". It is the work of a genuine scholar with the ability to develop a coherent, narrative that is accessible by the world beyond academia.

There are several reviews of this book, which also make interesting reading. Edkins is firmly castigated by Macgregor in his review for her use of "pat moralistic conclusions", "cliché, tautology and theoretical vagueness" and a "tumble of

metaphors” which he claims are the “sins of generic academic prose”. Having said as much, he commends Edkins as an excellent scholar and while he suggests her conclusions are naïve he concedes they are “not for that reason wrong”. The comments about writing style have some basis in fact, as the reviewer is at pains to illustrate. Clearly it distracted Macgregor from the meaning it was intending to convey but not this reader. The emphasis of descriptions signalled those concepts, ideas and relationships that deserve more than passing thought or glib acknowledgement. Elden (2012) provides a less colourful and more measured review.

This was a difficult book to read but not because it was badly written. It is a difficult book to write about, but not because there is nothing to say. It is a beautifully wrought, painfully acute, moving, thoughtful and challenging book. It raises important questions that need to be discussed. Stuart Elden

Edkins’ work conveys an important message. While the past is irretrievable, there is a need to ensure that we are all ‘equal speaking beings’, with stories that are known by those with whom we are connected. Particular lives must not be responded to in ways that reduce them to categories or numbers, as if the irreplaceable individual never lived. Perhaps this is melodramatic if you are detached from the experience of missingness, but it is central to the anxiety of family members living with missingness.

The book is rich with detail and description of relevant context. It is compelling in the balance it achieves between descriptions of disparate historical events, systems and processes, stories of individual experiences, and analysis, which requires the reader to question whose interests is represented and examine more closely the evidence that informs the positions taken. It invites us to move forward with clear priorities and develops the reasoning that informs the need to do so. She draws on well-known global events and makes links with the legacy of world wars, political conflicts and more recent man-made disasters. Elden concludes “It is ultimately a book that could have been many times longer, a mark both of its importance and the repetition of the kinds of events discussed”. It prompts you to think of events in Australia such as the stolen generations, experiences of forced

adoption and the large numbers of children separated from families and sent from England during WW2 until the 1960's.

Eight chapters unfold to illustrate the complexity of issues. The first makes clear the challenges in responding following the World Trade Centre disaster. Many people were simply unidentifiable by usual means and Edkins explains the shortcoming of systems and processes that were not sympathetic to the needs of individual citizens but rather geared towards a defensive, more military response – understandable but not without consequences. Some assumptions made by authorities in moving forward after the events of 9/11 were not welcomed by New Yorkers and others affected and contrary positions were publically taken with citizens campaigns such as Not in My Name. Chapter two, considers Displaced Persons in post war Europe and the malaise and confusion around how to move forward with such grand scale dislocation. Wyman (as cited in Edkins, 2011) suggests for displaced persons' "questions of food, clothing and even health were secondary to locating loved ones".

The third chapter provides a useful exploration of the history and politics of tracing services and the tensions between, military, government and non-government service providers. In the fourth chapter, the experience in the United Kingdom (UK) responding to the London bombing disaster raised quite different challenges to those presented by the events in Washington and New York. Chapter five traces the realities of forensic identification and issues related to sharing of information, privacy and timeliness. Edkins asserts that objects or remains found through searching are saturated with meaning for the left behind but laments this is not always appreciated by those involved with site clearing and reconstruction. The decision to move remains to a rubbish tip on Staten Island known as Fresh Kill is a stark example of administrative insensitivity. In chapter six the difference between 'soldiers' and 'citizens' are presented and the different protocols in relation to men (and women) missing in action adopted by the UK, Australia and the United States of America (USA) provide pause for consideration. Edkins suggests the UK and Australia governments do not actively search for missing-in-action and become concerned only once a body is found. In contrast in Vietnam, the US government has spent an estimated 1.2 million for each identified remains. Edkins asserts, a focus on individuals not incidents, people not processes is needed - *all* the time not only in emergencies - to avoid objectification and depersonalisation.

In chapter seven, the Disappeared in Argentina illustrates the importance of listening to those directly affected. The stories that inform the political positioning of Madres of the Plaza de Mayos in Argentina and the courage shown in offering resistance makes explicit the intricacies of political processes within activist groups as well as in the environment they are challenging. In the final chapter, titled Ambiguous Loss, Edkins reinforces the importance of honouring loss, without assuming the sense made of the experience. She touches on the contradictions and ethical considerations inherent in decisions about how to respond when someone goes missing. The right to know must be balanced with the right to disappear, and the rights of the missing balanced with the rights of those left behind. She invites consideration of the consequences of policy change in suggesting that more rigorous searching and tracking “may make escape except through suicide” impossible for those who need to escape. She reflects on government’s refusal to engage with those reported missing except in limited circumstances. She reasserts that while most who disappear are unlikely to be harmed, it is the *particular* human being that is of concern, not some category and muses that though most may have chosen to go missing and wish to remain missing, “some are relieved to be able to return”.

In conclusion, Edkins arrives at the notion that we may all, in some ways be missing persons as we “can never be fully known”, even to ourselves. Perhaps that is what makes the pain of someone going missing so raw and the need to search so compelling for most.

References

- Elden, S. (n.d.). Edkins, Jenny 2001 Missing: Persons and Politics, reviewed by Stuart Elden. Retrieved from <https://societyandspace.com/reviews/reviews-archive/edkins-jenny-2-11-missing-reviewed-by-stuart-elden/>
- Macgregor, M. (2012). Missing: Persons and Politics by Jenny Edkins. Retrieved from https://www.bookslut.com/nonfiction/2012_02_018708.php

Biographical notes

Adjunct Lecturer Julie Clark first graduated from the University of Queensland in 1982 and completed her PhD about the experience of siblings of long- term missing people in 2006. She currently lectures at Griffith University, School of Human Services and Social Work.