

## International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



## Book Reviews

### Fox JA and Levin J (2015) *Extreme Killing: Understanding Mass and Serial Murder* (3rd edn). Los Angeles: Sage.

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*Extreme Killing: Understanding Mass and Serial Murder* is now in its third edition, with the first having been published in 1985. Fox and Levin have updated the latest version of the book in a number of ways. Many of the older cases have been revised and high-profile new cases from around the world have been added. Two significant recent additions are chapters that discuss theories about the causes of multiple homicide and the role of firearms in multiple killings, including substantial discussion of the debates over American gun laws. *Extreme Killing* is one of few scholarly books on multiple homicide and is therefore widely cited by scholars working in the area as well as used in university teaching.

The book is divided into four sections with 21 chapters. Part I: *Multiple Murder* describes disproportionate media attention to multiple homicides, provides a typology of multiple murders, and reviews the ways that strain theory, social learning theory, routine activity theory, and control theory have been applied to multiple killings. Fox and Levin propose a typology of motives for multiple murder as a more useful way to categorise these killings than earlier typologies based solely on the chronology of the crimes. For example, they note the FBI used a 'trichotomy' of serial killing (which involves a series of killings over time with cooling off periods where the killer carries on with regular life between murders), spree murder (in which a series of crimes are committed in a frenzy of activity over a few or several days spent focused on committing the crimes), and mass murder (in which multiple people are killed as part of a single episode). Fox and Levin's typology of motives includes power, revenge, loyalty, profit, and terror.

Part II: *Serial Murder* opens with an extremely grisly description of a murder scene. Fox and Levin define serial murder as the killing of more than four people spread over a period of time with breaks between incidents. This section includes some of the most interesting portions of the book including a table describing the demographics of serial killers, a table presenting characteristics of killing sprees, and a figure showing trends in identified serial killings over time. This section also includes comparison of serial killing with other murders. Most of the chapters in this section provide vignettes of cases that exemplify different types of murder. There is also a chapter that discusses some of the theories of serial killing.

Part III: *Massacres* discusses mass killings, which the authors define as killings of four or more people as part of one incident. Fox and Levin discuss the challenges of defining and

distinguishing different types of multiple homicide and disparate attention to each type of killing by media and scholars. They note the lack of research on mass killings compared to serial killing despite available sources of official data on mass killings such as the FBI Supplementary Homicide Reports which, although imperfect, can potentially identify more cases of mass killing than serial killing due to incident-based data collection methods.

Part IV: *Epilogue* is one chapter on memorials to victims of mass killing. This chapter comments on the aftermath of mass killings and their disproportionate impact on small communities. The chapter discusses the harmful impact of morbid curiosity about killers and the politics of memorialising multiple killings.

Overall, the book is a unique compendium of cases, theories and empirical research on multiple killings, which makes it a useful addition to the literature. The authors synthesise an impressive amount of content given the relative paucity of empirical research on mass murders and relative overabundance of publications on individual serial killers. However, the book also reflects some weaknesses in the field. Multiple murders are marked by profound sex and significant racial differences which demand discussion and explanation. While Fox and Levin note repeatedly that the majority of US multiple killings are perpetrated by white men, the theories discussed in the book to explain these homicides focus on individual and interpersonal factors which pathologise the killers rather than connecting this type of violence to other well-documented patterns in crime. For example, in the chapter on 'Hate Motivated Mass Murder', the authors name *Blaming Women* as one type of hate crime. However, they fail to seriously consider the impact of patriarchal gender norms and entitlements on Lepine, Hennard, and Sodini's mass murders, all of which were inspired by what the perpetrators carefully articulated as feelings of thwarted entitlement to women's bodies, jobs, educational opportunities, and services. Rather than considering the source of the 'intense hatred of women' shared by these and other murderers, the authors focus on 'downward mobility' and 'a life of frustration' to explain these crimes. There is no consideration that the racist and sexist entitlement to the subordination of women that motivated these murders is far from deviant.

The focus on the exceptional character of multiple killings works against analysis of the normative cultural values that shape these incidents. For example, the authors opt for an oddly psychoanalytic interpretation of Marc Lepine's overtly political anti-feminist massacre, which mentions neither the manifesto where he explained his motives nor the large amount of extant scholarship on the murders. Instead, based on a single source, a Time-Life Book from 1992, Fox and Levin (p. 248) speculate that Lepine may have been repudiating the abusive father he resented yet with whom he identified. Likewise, Fox and Levin miss an opportunity to discuss domestic violence-related multiple murders when they characterised the 'DC Sniper' killings as motivated by greed when they were in fact part of an elaborate pattern of domestic violence-related stalking intended to culminate in the murder of John Muhammad's ex-wife, Mildred Muhammad (Mildred Muhammad, March 2015, personal communication). In addition to targeting Mildred Muhammad – the culmination of years of stalking, child abduction, and threats to kill her – John Muhammad's accomplice Lee Boyd Malvo's first victim was the niece of Isa Farrington-Nichols, a fellow domestic violence survivor who had assisted Mildred Muhammad after John abducted their children (Farrington-Nichols, 2009).

The conflation of sex and gender in the book contributes to a lack of consideration of some sociological influences on multiple murder. The term gender is used to refer to biological sex in the few places it appears in the chapters. The book seems to focus disproportionately on sexualised aspects of serial killing and sexualised motives for homicide, which often appear to be taken for granted when victims are female. Discussions of murders of women are accompanied by sensational, detailed descriptions of injuries. It is striking how different this is from many other scholarly books about crime, which do not describe each injury in lurid detail.

In sum, this book provides an introduction to multiple murders that will serve to entertain mass murder buffs. However, it may fall somewhat short for use by scholars due to limited contextualisation of these crimes and occasionally inaccurate treatment of some cases. Students miss out on an opportunity to understand the preventable aspects of multiple homicide due to the book's failure to grapple with normative values and beliefs that shape the distribution of multiple killings. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the title of the book, it contains more prurient details about specific killers who are characterised as 'extreme' individuals rather than community members reacting to social norms as well as individual strains.

In subsequent editions, I would like to see increased discussion of the exceptional prevalence of multiple homicides in the US compared with other countries. Given the inclusion of international cases, it would have been useful for readers to understand the international variation in murder and multiple murder rates. Greater comparison between multiple murders and other types of murders or other crimes would also be useful for students seeking to understand the place of multiple killing in the landscape of violent crime. Discussion of the higher than expected ratio of female victims of mass killings relative to all murders, as well as the fact that many mass killings are domestic violence or family violence related, would also be welcome additions to later editions.

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### **Reference**

Farrington-Nichols I (2009) *Genesis: The Bullet Was Meant for Me, D.C. Sniper Story Untold*. New York: Eloquent Books.