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The Logic of Torture

It's About Domination, Not Intelligence

by JEFF SPARROW

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In his poem ‘Le Mur des Fédérés’, Eugène Pottier describes the pock-marked stone against which the supporters of the Paris Commune were systematically massacred.

‘Your history, bourgeoisie,’ he writes. ‘Is written on that wall/It is not a difficult text to understand.’

We might say the same about the Senate Select Intelligence Committee’s report into torture, a practice that, it seems, was disconcertingly ordinary, performed along more-or-less the same lines that the American bourgeoisie conducts the rest of its business.

In the torture fanfic that proliferated after 9/11, enhanced interrogations represent a blow delivered not only to the prisoner but also to the Man, the pussified functionary who sneers at our hero’s street smarts.

That’s the almost anti-capitalist appeal of Jack Bauer: when he brings out the pliers, he defies terrorists and elitists alike, in the traditional face-off between blue collar man of action and white collar man of snark. The badass agent daring to torture punches through the abstraction of late capitalism and sinks his muscular arm up to the elbow in the Real.

Of course, in reality, torture seems to have been as bureaucratic as any other government program, with the interrogators more obsessed about memos and ass covering and obscure turf wars than stopping the progress of ticking time bombs. Like all the other Beltway drones, the CIA's team kissed up and kicked down, sucking up to their superiors while they tortured men to death.

In the sixties, James Bond's licence to kill distinguished him from the rest of Her Majesty's secret servants. The London Bobbies were duty sworn to obey the law; Bond's 007 designation elevated him out of the herd and into an enchanted circle of jet travel and vodka martinis and bikini-clad beauties.

But that divide between glamorous super agents and the state's workaday muscle belonged to the postwar boom. In today's period of slow moving crisis, glamour's vanished, while impunity for the representatives of the one per cent has been universalised.

When Eric Garner was selling loose cigarettes on a New York street, he encountered a regular cop, not an international man of mystery. But Garner was still choked to death, by an assailant seemingly entirely indifferent to the camera filming the attack.

The slogan #blacklivescount resonates precisely because everyone knows that, by and large, they don't – while Arab lives count even less.

'I can't breathe,' said Garner, a cry no doubt repeated during each and every waterboarding session.

In *24*, Jack Bauer might be hard-bitten but he's also, underneath the manly exterior, an idealist. By contrast, the real life torture program seems to have been a magnet for carpetbaggers, shonks and conmen.

Upon his arrival in Hollywood during its Golden Era, the screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz reportedly fired a telegram back to friends in New York: 'Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots. Don't let this get around.'

No doubt James Elmer Mitchell and Bruce Jessen, the psychologists responsible for the interrogation protocols, sent each other similar messages.

The pair received contracts worth a staggering $180 million for their handiwork, a farrago of junk science and rightwing fantasy (think of how much the traditional conservative obsession with anal sex as the ultimate humiliation seems to have featured)

The American state was, in other words, heavily reliant on the outsourcing of pain. As per usual, the real dirty work went to the Third World (the Egyptian and Libyan regimes tortured on the cheap), while the private sector creamed off the big bucks – much as it did in Iraq.

But it would be wrong to think of the program as merely a scam, just as it would be an error to imgine Operation Iraqi Freedom invasion was launched purely for the enrichment of Cheney and his pals.

The media's current obsession about whether torture 'works' is as asinine as it's repugnant.

Quite obviously, torture works – though, like capitalism itself, not necessarily in the way its apologists claim.

'For ten years, if not more,' declared the Old Bolshevik Kamenev to the Moscow court in 1936, 'I waged a struggle against the Party, against the government of the land of Soviets, and against Stalin personally.'

That preposterous confession was wrung from one of Lenin's closest allies by pretty much the same methods detailed in the select committee's report: sleep deprivation, isolation, threats against loved ones and so on. It's not very far from the hallucinatory testimony at the Moscow Trials to the descriptions of Abu Zubaydah as such a broken shell that the interrogator needed only to raise his eyebrows to make the detainee shuffle over and lie down on the waiting waterboard.

Even though you can, quite probably, obtain information via stress positions and simulated drownings (at least under certain circumstances), torture's mostly about power rather than knowledge. From the Spanish Inquisition to Stalin's Russia, interrogators have used to pain to produce not facts but confessions, a ritualized acknowledgement by the detainee of the regime's power.

'Torture isn't about secretly collecting information,' says Matthew Gault. 'It never has been. Torture only works when it *isn't* secret. Fear is only effective when it spreads. Terrorism only works when it happens in public.'

That's not quite true: the Stalinists always made their victims deny publicly that anything bad happened in the basements of the Lubianka. Better, perhaps, to speak of the dialectic between avowal and denial that makes torture an open secret: fearsome because shrouded in mystery but sufficiently well known to serve as a distinctive vocabulary for the exercise of power.

In October this year, eight Christian peace activists staged a protest on Swan Island in Victoria, Australia, an area used for training the Australian Secret Intelligence Agency. Almost immediately, they were apprehended by commandoes from the Special Air Service.

A fairly minor incident, one would think. Nonetheless, these elite soldiers screamed at the protesters, hooded them, cut their clothes away, dragged them across the ground and threatened them with rape and drowning. In other words, they implemented against non-violent protesters an element of the CIA's interrogation protocol known as 'rough takedown', in which (according to the Senate report):

approximately five CIA officers would scream at a detainee, drag him outside of his cell, cut his clothes off, and secure him with Mylar tape. The detainee would then be hooded and dragged up and down a long corridor while being slapped and punched.

How does this practice migrate all the way to Australia? Sure, the SAS men had presumably undergone some version of the CIA training but why would they unleash it on peace protesters, who were palpably not terrorists?

Clearly, the commandoes did not expect to extract information. They did want to exert their authority – and, like everyone else, they were conversant with the contemporary tropes of political domination.

Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and the atrocities committed within the CIA's black sites provide spectacular representations of unbridled power, representations that have now been effectively globalized. When Australian soldiers want to seem hard, they mimic, without even thinking about it, the behavior of the big boys.

Think of the wannabees of the Islamic State. Yes, IS showcases beheadings in its social media productions because that's form of cruelty with particular associations in the region. But Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's men also make a point of subjecting their captives to waterboarding – again, not to learn anything, but because they understand the new lexicon of political dominion.

After the fall of the Commune, the good and the great of Paris conducted days of public executions: 'Any passer-by calling a man by a revolutionary name caused him to be shot by soldiers eager to get the premium … Members and functionaries of the Commune were thus shot, and often several times over, in the persons of individuals who resembled them more or less.'

The slaughter might have been indiscriminate but it was not senseless. On the contrary, it delivered a clear message: mess with us and we'll fuck you up.

But, as Pottier's poem suggests, a bloodcurdling threat can, depending on the balance of power, also be the basis for an indictment.

In the wake of the torture report, we stand on a cusp. If the outrage at these revelations can be channeled into action, it might, perhaps, prove possible to push the state back a little, much as the rebellion over Ferguson is already forcing police to think twice before they reach for the trigger.

If, however, the reaction simply dissipates, a new threshold will have been broached and Cheney's Dark Side will become something more like the new normal.

The report is not a difficult text to understand. The question is what we do with that knowledge.