

Making Psychohistorical Sense of the CIA Torture Report

by Brian D'Agostino

Most Americans were rightly appalled when parts of the “Senate Intelligence Committee Report on CIA Torture” were released to the public last December. But they were also shocked, which is a measure of widespread political and psychohistorical ignorance. Mislead by sanitized history textbooks and a media establishment that is itself part of the country’s power structure, the average American has apparently never learned that their government has a multi-decade history of supporting regimes that have practiced torture on an administrative basis. Some still do, such as Egypt, a recipient of hundreds of millions of dollars in US military aid every year.

As far as the general public knows, these are “friendly” regimes, exactly what they are called in the mainstream media. This is code for “friendly to American corporate and state interests.” The use of torture and the people being tortured are almost never mentioned, except on the rare occasions that the victims are Americans, like the nuns who were beaten, raped and murdered by Salvadoran National Guardsmen in 1980.

Since the end of World War II, the United States has provided training in the modern methods of torture to dictatorships in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Most notorious in this regard is the “School of the Americas,” which has featured perhaps the most advanced torture curriculum in the world. Now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, it has been located since 1984 in Georgia’s Fort Benning, deep in the heart of America’s Bible Belt. Under Jimmy Carter, the “human

rights president,” 35 countries in the world practiced torture routinely, of which 26 were US allies and recipients of military and “internal security” aid totaling more than \$36 billion between 1946 and 1975 (Chomsky, 1979).



Photo of torture in Abu Ghraib detention center that went viral in 2004

What was new about the CIA’s “Enhanced Interrogation Program” is not U.S. complicity in torture, but rather Uncle Sam getting his hands dirty with the direct administration of torture on non-Americans. Previously, torture was outsourced to “friendly” regimes, or was practiced by Americans only on American troops as “training.” The direct administration of torture by the United States from 2002 through 2006 is indeed a new and disturbing development in our recent history, but to understand it psychohistorically, we must put it into the broader historical context I have sketched here.

Interrogation or Intimidation?

There are two points to take away from the CIA torture report: that the use of torture during interrogations doesn’t

produce reliable information and that the CIA did it anyway. The fact that it doesn’t work has been known for centuries. Upholding the ban on torture officially enacted by the French government eighteen years earlier, Napoleon Bonaparte reportedly said in 1798: “the barbarous custom of whipping men suspected of having important secrets to reveal must be abolished. It has always been recognized that this method of interrogation, by putting men to the torture, is useless. The wretches say whatever comes into their heads and whatever they think one wants to believe. Consequently, the Commander-in-Chief forbids the use of a method which is contrary to reason and humanity” (quoted in Cotton, 2013).

Though torture has little or no value as a tool of interrogation, it has enormous instrumental value to ruthless power holders as a tool of intimidation to deter political behavior. In that capacity, it protects “American interests,” though in reality these are corporate and state interests, not the public interest in whose name these violent policies are enacted.

When the United States and its allies (e.g. Egypt) use torture to intimidate civilian populations, this is itself a form of terrorism, which is rightly labelled “state terrorism.” Nor are the people who are being deterred necessarily violent actors. The political activists and clergy who were tortured by fascist allies of the United States in recent decades were not agents of political violence, but of democracy. Similarly, members of the Muslim Brotherhood being tortured

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today in Egypt were agents of democracy, however imperfect. Their crime was not terrorism, but the crime of having won an election and thereby displeasing the fascist elements of Egyptian society, which the United States previously and currently supports.

Poisonous Pedagogy

But let us return to the myth that the real purpose of the CIA's torture program was to extract information needed to save American lives. This myth serves a dual purpose—legitimizing torture in the eyes of the American public, and simultaneously providing a noble rationale so that those who ordered and administered

torture could feel good about themselves. This latter purpose relates to what Robert Jay Lifton called “doubling,” a term he coined for the dissociation he observed in interviews



Psychologist Alice Miller, who coined the term “poisonous pedagogy”

with Nazi doctors and U.S. nuclear war planners. Even while aiding and implementing genocidal policies, these professionals told themselves reassuring cover stories—that they were acting to rid Germany of “life

unworthy of life,” or saving the world from nuclear holocaust through Mutually Assured Destruction (Lifton and Markusen, 1990)

This raises the ultimate psycho-historical question—why do people engage in sadistic or genocidal projects in the first place? In answering this question, I draw in the following paragraphs on Marc-André Cotton's “Poisonous Pedagogy: The Contentious Drift of Psychology” <http://www.regardconscient.net/earchives/1303driftofpsychology.html>

“Poisonous Pedagogy,” Alice Miller's term for cruelty in childrearing rationalized as moral education, is found to shed light on the unconscious, sadistic motivations served by the practice of torture.

The aim of poisonous pedagogy is the use of corporal punishment in its

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punitive parenting and how they might account for right wing beliefs and attitudes. Some members of the group questioned this theory, and D'Agostino responded. The discussion then moved to the unconscious motivations of leaders and groups, and to a critique of Lloyd deMause's “Psychogenic Theory of History.”

BARNARD COLLIER: If the response of children to “strict” (and perhaps “inhumane”) parenting—rebellion vs. suppression of their rage—is simply a playing out of predetermined anal and oral, father and mother-centered generic psychological operations, then what difference does a “strict” or “lenient” or “parentally missing” upbringing make?

KEN FUCHSMAN: How do we know that children raised by a punitive father will end up on the radical right? First, is there psychological or political science research that shows the correlation of parenting styles with political attitudes? Second, why would the strict paternal upbringing lead to a rightist relation to authority rather than a leftist or liberal rebellion against political and psychological authority, or even obedience to punitive authority? What evidence do we have that shows that one response to punitive authority is more likely than another?

ALICE MAHER: I don't think the issue is child-rearing per se; it's about the way individuals and groups of people internalize their childhood experiences and the core conscious and unconscious fantasies and defenses that arise from those experiences. Different children can be raised by the same parents in the same communities, and develop as very different individuals.

People want to run the world, or be embraced by it, or destroy it, or whatever, based on the unique ways that they internalize their childhood experiences. That's related to, but different from, child-rearing practices.

BILL ARGUS: I agree with Alice. It is my understanding that it is not so much about the specific abuse but how that abuse is internalized. That will determine to a certain extent what a person's worldview is – how they make sense of the world and the abuse that happened to them.

BRIAN D'AGOSTINO: Yes, of course there are individual variations in the way people react to the same childrearing practices. My brother and I were raised in the same conservative Republican household with a strict father. I rebelled and became a leftist while my brother is a conservative Republican to this day. But when talking about history,

endlessly ingenious variants to break the “willful” ego of a young child, whose spontaneous behavior is thought to be depraved and in need of moral education. Luther Emmet Holt, one of the founders of American pediatrics, similarly advocated the imposition of order on the unruly impulses of infants. In his best-selling 1894 book *The Care and Feeding of Children*, he advised mothers to ignore the cries of their hungry infants and feed them on a regular schedule by the clock.

B. F. Skinner, who pioneered the modern science of behavior modification, was born in 1904, when Holt’s ideas about infant care dominated child-rearing in the United States. His advocacy of rewards (“positive reinforcement”) for the conditioning of behavior might at first glance seem like the antithesis of poisonous pedagogy, which is based on punishment and fear. Indeed, Cotton notes that Skinner’s grandmother frightened him as a young child with vivid images of hell fire reserved for those who misbehave, and that dread of punishment was probably a salient element of his personality and influence on his work as a behavioral scientist.

But positive reinforcement doesn’t work unless the animal or person is first in a state of deprivation—food is not a reward for a laboratory rat unless it is hungry. So the behavioral scientist must first control the animal’s food supply and systematically withhold food until the animal is hungry and tries various behaviors to end its hunger. Only then can the desired behavior be successfully “reinforced” by the provision of food.

“New and Improved” Torture

The science of behavior modification brought about a new paradigm for the practice of torture. Unlike old-

fashioned methods that produced enduring physical trauma, these behavior modification techniques produce psychologically and physically distressful states of deprivation that are reversible. Deprive people of their dignity, their sleep, a tolerable room temperature, or even their air supply (in the case of waterboarding). Then, when they perform the desired behavior—in this case, divulging supposedly strategic information—“reinforce” it by restoring a benign environment.



Harvard psychologist B.F. Skinner

While the CIA contended that these experiences cause no enduring harm, psychological trauma is inevitable, the severity of which depends on the severity of the torture. And the severity is escalated, to horrific levels if necessary, until the victim is “broken.” As with old-fashioned torture, this is modelled on poisonous pedagogy, where the parent escalates the level of punishment until he breaks the ego of the child.

And so it was that the CIA employed behavioral psychologists—most notably John “Bruce” Jessen and James E. Mitchell—to design their “enhanced interrogation program” and train torture teams for deployment to the Guantanamo (GTMO), Abu Ghraib, and various other detention centers. These contractors were seasoned torturers, having tested the same behavior modification techniques on Americans

in the Air Force’s SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) training program. Jessen brought especially strong sadistic credentials to the project, having a reputation among other SERE instructors for being “too aggressive.” The CIA’s top lawyer called some of the interrogation techniques “sadistic and terrifying,” but left it to the Justice Department to determine their legality (Risen and Apuzzo, 2014).

Never mind that as good or better information could be obtained by conventional, non-violent methods of interrogation. That would spoil the whole thing, by depriving the torturers of their sadistic gratification and their bosses of the “deterrence value” of torture. And the latter is a useful tool of power when enacting corporate-friendly policies unlikely to receive the support of democratic electorates at home and abroad.

References

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