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ASIAN AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES



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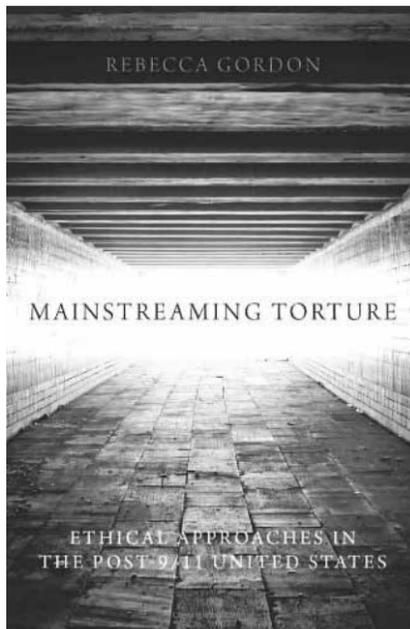
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MAINSTREAMING TORTURE

Ethical Approaches in the Post-9/11 United States

reviewed by KAREN MALPEDE

REBECCA Gordon's *Mainstreaming Torture* is written in a lucid and elegant prose. She combines the sensibility of moral philosopher with that of political activist. As such, she represents the best American tradition of deep, free thinking, nonviolent stance-taker for the public good (think Thoreau, Martin Luther King, Barbara Deming, Grace Paley). This is, unfortunately, a tradition currently in short supply. For as Gordon and others, like Darius Rejali, point out, the majority of Americans now favor torture "to keep us safe". This percentage has been on the rise ever since President Obama came to office, with his promises to end torture (using drone warfare, instead, to annihilate "terrorists") and to close the Guantanamo Bay prison camp. The inclination to torture, and acceptance of murder by drone, by the majority of citizens of the world's most powerful liberal democracy is explicable only if we understand that this is a nation in the grip of irrational fear of the other, enhanced, but certainly not solely created by the shock of the attacks of 9/11, for its roots go deep into the irrationality of American racism. This abiding fear Gordon boldly says has made us a nation of cowards, incapable, therefore, of fulfilling the purpose of life which is to live it wisely, with the goal of examined happiness, "employing the cardinal virtues of justice, courage, temperance, and prudence, or "wisdom about human affairs."



The Iraq war was started on lies, gotten by torture, that the majority of Americans came to believe. This information is not new, but it bears repeating at least until it is widely understood. Ibn al-Shaykh Al Libi was tortured until he told the CIA what the Bush administration needed to hear, the lie that Saddam Hussein was training and equipping Al Qaeda. Al-Libi mysteriously died in prison, but Shaker Aamer the only British citizen still being held in Guantanamo without charges and recently denied release even on grounds of severe mental illness, may have witnessed the torture of Al-Libi and this may be the reason he will never see the end of

his nightmare imprisonment. When I asked one of his reprieve lawyers about this last summer, she replied, "Shaker witnessed a lot of things." Torture not only ruins individual lives, and families, but, far from keeping Americans safe, the U.S. torture program was used to begin an illegal invasion and set the stage for the massive death. Re-telling the Al-Libi story helps Gordon demolish the "ticking time bomb" notion that torture, if rigorously applied to the right person at the right moment by unflinching, wise torturers in possession of certain information about an imminent terrorist attack, will lead to actionable intelligence that can be employed just before the bomb goes off to save hundreds of lives. The fallacy of this fiction,

again, is not new, but bears repeating. The "ticking time bomb" scenario often used, and accepted, as the "only" reason for tolerating torture, is nothing but a conventional narrative strategy employed in schlock entertainment schemes like the television serial "24" to keep audiences rooted to their seats and dead to thought.

The breadth of Gordon's unfolding argument benefits greatly from the added authority of her previous experiences as an activist during the dirty wars in Central and South America—funded and supported in large part by covert U.S. actions and propagated by right-wing forces that used systematic torture, administered by police and military trained in and by the U.S., to dismantle popular opposition. Torture is not a discrete activity but a practice. As practice, or "false practice" as Gordon comes to name it, torture is deeply imbedded in the infrastructure of the state. There are manuals, and training camps; there must be tools and equipment, various levels of expertise, locations maintained where torture can be carried out, an underlying theory, or theories, orders given and followed, reports made and read, techniques perfected and passed on, ever-increasing budgets, and the force of accumulating history.

As cogent as these arguments are, I am not certain who she is thinking to convince (who are any of us going to convince). For it feels to me as if the entire question of torture immediately implicates our most irrational selves and this is why I wrote a wildly surreal play about the U.S. torture program, "Another Life" in the wake of 9/11 to dramatize the mass irrationality, and some of the principled resistance, that took hold. One is either repulsed by torture, instinctually, in one's core, or brutally attracted. Gordon says that what led her to write her book was her conviction that "torture is wrong and has to stop." Torture strikes me as deeply visceral, perversely sexual (as, in fact, many actual tortures are). Why the fascination among torturers with genitalia, sexual humiliation, threatened, simulated and actual rape, if torture were not primarily pre-rational sexuality at its source, made and promoted in the unconscious, infantile, all-devouring brain. After the pacifist American theater group, The Living Theater, was incarcerated for some

months in Brazilian prisons during the dictatorship, they emerged to make a play "Seven Meditations on Political Sado-Masochism" about the torture they had heard through the walls and been told of by other prisoners. My point is this: torture exerts the same primal pull on us as sex. Some of us recoil in revulsion at the very thought of inflicting intimate pain on others while for others sexual violence fascinates in the extreme. (Indeed, in the course of a life, if I am honest, I can partake in each end of the sexual fantasy and practice.) In this Puritan country, the United States, it is not insignificant that the torture program was instituted and run by the political party of, so-called, family values: the same party that stands so resolutely against abortion that their fringe members would rather assassinate abortion providers than allow freedom of reproductive choice. Dick Cheney's "dark side" is, indeed, just that; Cheney's repressed, infantile desire to engage in wanton sadistic consuming of the source of life itself: to end forever the problem of the other by devouring it. So, perhaps, the adherence to torture by a growing majority of Americans for the "purpose of keeping us safe" is something other altogether; it is not about safety so much as about the glee of taking part in the forbidden, of being allowed to participate, even from a distance, in the complete violation of another's flesh for the purpose of satisfying the repressed omnivorous urge. If this is so, and I'm feeling quite out on a limb, then we are as a nation made even worse than cowards by our commitment to torture. We are infantile, sadistic cowards to boot, and perhaps there is no other sort. We not only wish to be safe ourselves at any cost but to watch (or do) from armored safety while another person writhes and squirms and soils him/herself.

Leaving, aside, now, the sexual nature of torture, our national life does seem to be increasingly infected with acts of brutal cowardliness. This summer has witnessed an entire country, the richest the world has ever known, flummoxed and convulsed about how to handle the influx of unaccompanied minor children over our Southern border, fleeing unbearable poverty and gang violence from Honduras, the murder capital of the world, Guatemala and El Salvador. All sorts of rumors are being manufactured about these children whose desperate presence seems to present an

existential threat to the American way of life. No one in government can figure out what to do except stir up the populace. Noam Chomsky is among the few who have pointed out that the crime-ridden, impoverished countries from which these children flee to enter this one (which could easily house, feed and care for every one, reunite them with family members, and offer all sorts of support for the same money it will take to run the deportation jails and courts) are the same ones where the United States trained and supported torturers and military coups in the 1970s and 80s. This immigration “problem” we face now results from past foreign policy.

Rebecca Gordon does a great service to the anti-torture argument by bringing in the American prison system, the place from which Charles Graner, one of the infamous Abu Ghraib torturers arose. In fact there is a revolving door policy from prison guard to National Guard members who work in military prisons, from home to war zone, and back home again, acquiring new techniques of torture and experience to share on all occasions. Solitary confinement is torture, and our prisons are full of inmates kept in such inhumane conditions for years in maximum security prisons throughout the land. The enormous size of the U.S. prison population is itself a scandal, as is its racial make-up, predominantly black and Latino, with an increasing number of Muslims, in a predominantly white nation. The torture practices we export to other countries are imbedded in our so-called justice system here at home.

Given how thoroughly torture has become part of the national project and imagination, how entwined torture is with the irrationalities of fear and desire and with, I would add, our unhappiness; we are unlikely to convince anyone by talking but only by taking action. If torture is false practice it must be replaced by a true practice inherently more attractive—the daily choice-making geared toward creating and maintaining the pleasurable virtues of life well-lived. Both I as playwright and Gordon as philosopher rely upon Aristotle’s valuation of the primacy of action. “It is their characters, indeed, that make men what they are, but it is by reason of their actions that they

are happy or the reverse,” he says in *The Poetics*. We become happy by taking actions for the good of our selves and of others. This is how I understand the practice of virtue in which Gordon grounds her moral philosophical argument. Drawing heavily upon “the contemporary virtue ethics of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre” Gordon writes

“the good human life consists in a life-long quest to understand what constitutes the good life. This idea is not quite as circular as it sounds. It is an acknowledgement that even the most unexamined life involves a search—a quest—for whatever activities, experiences, and relationships will make that life a good one.”

Human beings if they are to live meaningfully engage in a variety of social practices that partake of and create traditions to achieve the flourishing of self and community.

“I have argued that torture is a false practice. That is, it is a practice in which the quest for the good life has been diverted and in which the cardinal virtues of justice, courage, temperance, and prudence, ‘or wisdom about human affairs,’ which I have called ‘practical wisdom,’ are deformed.”

She goes farther. Torture, Gordon repeats, makes us cowards. It supports the fantasy that we can be kept safe at any cost; that certain lives (American) are worth more than any other. From this first fallacy another irrational fallacy follows: that we might by destroying others keep our own deaths at bay. Torture becomes a pathway to immortality. If we accept this “repression of reality” Gordon quotes journalist Gary Kamiya as writing “it and the infantile reality of perfect safety—in other words, cowardice—become the driving force in our lives.”

She is further correct, providing intellectual leadership, again, alongside others like Christian Parenti and Naomi Klein, by linking the violence of torture meant to sustain the American way of life with the observation that because of global warming the American way of life ought not to be sustained,

but needs radical reimagining. Torture and the wars that torture engenders, recent ones fought mainly for oil, are but deadly distractions from the real work at hand if we are to be able to live a good life—one that supports rather than further depletes natural resources, one that is bearable, even possible for generations to come, because we act forcefully now to limit further green house gas emissions.

What is to be done? Gordon, like many before her who have contemplated the U.S. torture program, says there must somehow be a full reckoning, that those people high in government, President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Rumsfeld, John Yoo and the other lawyers in the Dept. of Justice, private contractors, the CIA, must be held publically accountable. Because this is most unlikely to happen ever since President Obama took office and announced we must look forward, not back, the institutionalized U.S. torture program remains in place, ready to go into high gear at the next terrorist attack. “Torture which was once illegal,” says Mark Danner, “is now a policy choice.”

Gordon concludes her brave and comprehensive book: “I do not pretend to know how to engender and sustain virtue in a complex modern society like the United States. But building a movement to end the practice of institutionalized state torture might be a good place to begin. Members of such a movement might transform the very work of dismantling a false practice into a true practice, in the process of which we might be formed in virtues such as justice, courage, temperance and prudence.”

With her principled insistence on understanding what the good life entails, suddenly a ray of hope appears: it matters what each one of us does, opposing torture and calling for a full accounting could become a part of the daily action of a movement of concerned citizens. Since practicing the good life leads eventually to living it, and as the good life is the goal of every human being, we might begin by putting one foot on the road.

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Karen Malpede, an American playwright, is author most recently of the plays “Another Life” about the U.S. torture program and “Extreme Whether” about the U.S. obstructionism over climate science which will have its world premiere Oct. 2, in New York. www.theaterthreecollaborative.org