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Review Article

Prison and Empire:

Archipelagoes of Confinement and the New World Order

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THE ABU GHRAIB INVESTIGATIONS The Official Report of the Independent Panel and Pentagon on the Shocking Prisoner Abuse in Iraq. Edited by Steven Strasser. Illustrated. 2005 175 pp. PublicAffairs. Paper, \$14.

TORTURE AND TRUTH America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror. By Mark Danner. Illustrated. 2005 580 pp. New York Review Books. Paper, \$19.95.

ARE PRISONS OBSOLETE? By Angela Y. Davis. Seven Stories Press 2003. Paper, 128pp. \$8.95.

This past February I had an experience that was once all but ubiquitous for travelers to and from Ireland and North America, the Shannon stopover. The compulsory deplaning accomplished, I found myself in the spiritual home of Duty Free Shopping, examining the miniature High Crosses of pressed turf, various woolen items, and even buying my mom a kitschy cottage scene to hang on her wall. Not surprisingly, there were a lot of Yanks (besides myself) milling about. The novel aspect of my forced shopping spree, through, was that this crowd was composed mostly of 200 or so US Marines and Army Reservists (according to my unscientific sample of conversations) in desert combat fatigues napping, shopping, and drinking. They were all on their way to Iraq, just shy of the second anniversary of the invasion (19 March) and the hasty declaration of “mission accomplished.” I suspect that even the most gung-ho amongst them knew what they were getting into – a long, drawn out, bloody occupation whose main impetus now seems to be the inertia of its history rather than any coherent plan of leaving the country in better shape than when the war started. I wondered how many of the faces I saw there were to end up as casualty figures scarcely mentioned at home, and how many Iraqis they would kill during their foreign tenure whom would never get counted at all.

I doubt that Middle Ireland has much of a sense of the importance of Shannon to the supply line of the American occupation of Iraq. Different political cultures seem to produce forms of bad faith. By bad faith, I mean a seeming contradiction between what subjects see and what they profess. In Ireland, for example, a valorization of “neutrality” coexists more or less peacefully with such blatant examples of its violation. If such violations can be discretely hidden and little media attention paid to them, however, other forms of bad faith seem in comparison even more hypocritical, and therefore, oddly comforting. Perhaps, the most egregious form of bad faith connected to the Iraq War to date has been the Abu Ghraib Prison scandal and the American reaction to it, for here, even the worst critics of the Bush administration’s policies seemed to be shown to be naïve

idealists, and the proponents of the occupation to be at best the dupes of a perverse and sadistic exercise in power. It seemed to confirm the worst opinions of the American invasion at large in much of Europe, but it did allow various Anti-War coalitions a sort of consolation prize – the knowledge of having been morally correct, making up a bit for our continued political impotence.

I begin this discussion of some new additions to what is now a sizeable bibliography on just this aspect of the Iraq War¹ with a mention of bad faith because it seems to me that the willingness of vast swathes of democratic electorates in very different countries to actively not see connections is a significant feature of this conflict. It is easy enough to hold the current American administration in contempt (for the most part they richly deserve this censure), but this sentiment obscures how even those who aver their opposition to this war contribute to its continuation, and it also misses the myriad ways that bad faith operates in the mechanics of hegemony. It seems to me that this process is fundamentally bound up with (what at least should be) important anthropological problems, that is, how people reproduce systems of meaning and power, how they imagine their world works and what they count as evidence for these beliefs, and, finally, how they understand their own agency within structures they experience as alienated from themselves. To help elaborate some of these issues with respect to the American reaction to Abu Ghraib, I will also discuss a recent volume by Angela Davis critically reviewing the penal system in the United States, as a way of connecting the recent domestic “great confinement” in America with the issue of the indefinite detainment of “Enemy Combatants” in the current exercise of American might.

The Strasser and Danner volumes give as an exhaustive account as is currently possible of the nature of the foreign archipelagoes of confinement that have sprung up during the “war on terror.” They show just how much documentation of serious abuses exists that hovers at the edge of our consciousness of this conflict. Both volumes, not surprisingly, make grim reading, not just in the details of torture, or in the legerdemain of politicians and pundits as to what “abuse” actually means, but more importantly in their status as evidence of the virtuoso management of “consent” for this undertaking (which, even in America, had a sizeable plurality of the electorate opposed to the adventure, and which was overwhelmingly opposed throughout Europe). In the event, there are few

¹ According to my count there are nine books just on the prisoner issue in this new war, nearly all of them focused on Abu Ghraib, a scandal that became public only at the end of April 2004. Several more books are on their way, including ones surveying the abuses at Guantanamo in Cuba. There have also been hundreds of articles appearing in nearly every conceivable publishing venue (including most of one edition of the *American Anthropologist Newsletter* (Volume 45, No. 6, September 2004)). Finally, the internet hits for more informal writings, such as commentaries and blogs, on these issues number in the thousands. Factoring the new works on the potential ethics of torture (e.g., Alan Dershowitz), there has been something of a publishing cottage industry on the specifics of (and the theoretical justifications for) torture and abuse over the past eighteen months (For a considered review of many of these works, see Hajjar 2005). Consequently, any article surveying this field is always in danger of being overtaken by events.

Americans who know nothing about Abu Ghraib (and recognize that many such centers must exist in other places in Iraq and even farther conceptually, if not geographically, afield), but these revelations have only entrenched the opposition of those already opposed to this adventure, while serving at best as an opportunity for soul-searching (but not opposition) for even thoughtful commentators originally in favour of the war. For the majority of the American electorate, however, Abu Ghraib barely registered as an aside in the last presidential election. John Kerry scarcely acknowledged Abu Ghraib, for example, and, after the initial revelations, political commentators on what passes for the “Left” in the United States mentioned it only as one more deplorable aspect of the war, less pressing for a typical American voter, perhaps, than American dead and wounded and higher gas prices, but still bad. I believe that, as far as the last presidential election was concerned, the Kerry camp and its allies reckoned (probably correctly) that this was not an issue of any great importance to most Americans, especially to that stratum of the white working class, who are disproportionately represented in the military, that both the Republicans and Democrats were actively courting. Oddly (or perhaps not), no American commentator (to my knowledge) drew any connections between the abuse’s violent sexual (often homoerotic) overtones and the passions aroused by the 11 state constitutional amendments banning “gay marriage” in the so-called swing states.

Nonetheless, the limited number of images that were released (and both texts give a good sense of just how little of what went on in Abu Ghraib even now could properly be called “public”) seemed to demand a more principled response than glossing and denial, especially from those who supported the war who styled themselves “intellectuals.” Here another, more subtle form of bad faith makes itself evident. This form of bad faith seeks not to avoid questions, merely to strictly limit their scope and the sort of issues they might raise. Thus, the traditional means of unraveling a “Scandal” immediately became preeminent in the public production of Abu Ghraib in this section of American Punditry, that is the apportioning of responsibility to individuals: “what did they know?” and “when did they know it?” These answers inevitably involve (often complicated) timelines, but they also allow for the mitigating factors of the limited conceptual horizons of significant actors in the drama (with hindsight always metaphorically positioned on higher ground), and they invariably reveal the pitfalls that lie between the inspiration for “policy” (generally good and high-minded) and its execution (always fraught, sometimes disastrously so). Like Tolstoy’s aphorism about happy people, though, the answers to these questions make poor narratives, as their plot and characters tend to be numbingly similar, despite the differences in surface detail. For the current version of the Abu Ghraib narrative, they involve the usual suspects of good leaders with limited information, petty bureaucratic infighting, genuine confusion at nearly every command level as to what (if anything) constituted “torture,” good people asked to do a tough job in a fallen world, and which (possibly all) of the detainees were legitimate targets of abuse. Aspects of this narrative have been intelligently enough examined by a variety of commentators (Sullivan (January 30, 2005), Brooks (4 November

2003, 11 May, 2004), and I want to sketch out some of the issues they have highlighted, if only partially, below.

Just according to the narrow issue of “whose fault is it?” and “should someone be fired, even prosecuted?,” the Strasser and Danner volumes read like specifications in a set of charges that minimally should send the current Secretary of Defense to the unemployment line. While the available documentation makes it impossible to know for certain if anyone in the administrations “planned” all the terrible activities at Abu Ghraib (or Guantánamo, or the several other places that even informed citizens would have difficulty listing), it is clear that members of the Bush Administration, from the start, knew that their doctrine of “preemptive” war was going to entail a different relationship to prisoners of these new conflicts. First, the politics in the bulls-eye of these crusaders for freedom were seen to be either too dysfunctional or too illegitimate to treat as entities similar to the US, and therefore the Geneva Conventions, understood as agreements between states, were seen not to apply as *law* determining American responsibilities to such prisoners. Second (and more importantly), the legal wing of this administration, predominantly recruited from the reactionary *Federalist Society*, were vehemently opposed to the fundamental premise of international law, that *any* internationally-derived statute had the ability to restrict American Law or Policy.

Before Afghanistan and the Bush administration’s resolve to attack Iraq (almost certainly no later than early 2002, possibly before September 2001), legal opinions about the mechanics of these new conflicts were sought out by this administration and duly provided by its appointees. They seemed even better tailored to the administration’s needs than the “Intelligence” which justified the Iraq invasion. Just one example from Strasser’s work will have to do for many: in the run-up to the conflict, Assistant Attorney General Jay S. Bybee (since nominated to a federal Appellate court) analyzed the relevant statutes against torture to see exactly how far the military could go in mistreating prisoners without blatant illegality. His answer was, not surprisingly, expansive. His strategy was an interesting one, however. He actually tracked closely to the idea of “humane” treatment in the Geneva Conventions, but widened the gray area between such treatment and “torture” by almost ludicrously restricting its legitimate definition, on the one hand, and expanding the idea of military necessity, on the other. Thus, he asserted that the president was within his legal rights to permit his military surrogates to inflict “cruel, inhuman or degrading” treatment on prisoners without violating strictures against torture. For an act of abuse to be considered torture, the abuser must be inflicting pain “of such a high level of intensity that the pain is difficult for the subject to endure.” If the abuser is doing this to get information, and not merely for sadistic enjoyment, then “even if the defendant knows that severe pain will result from his actions,” he is not guilty of torture *per se*. Beating prisoners is not torture either: thus, Bybee argues that a case of kicking an inmate in the stomach, while the prisoner is in a kneeling position does not *by itself* rise to the level of torture. Finally, he even suggests that full-fledged “torture” of inmates (whose definition by now must be

horrific indeed) might be *still be legitimate* because it could be construed as “self-defense,” on the grounds that “the threat of an impending terrorist attack threatens the lives of hundreds if not thousands of American citizens.” Clearly, torture could be justified almost anywhere “on the battlefield” in the war on terror because, as we know this new, seemingly permanent, state of war is “everywhere,” and we are all foot soldiers in it. Only the president’s discretion, we are told, forbade such activities, not international law or evolving standards of decency. These guidelines were only formally repudiated by the administration the week before Alberto Gonzales’s appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee for confirmation as Attorney-General, but what (if any) legal limits exist to abusive treatment of prisoners, according to the Bush Administration, is still, at best, vague.²

The results of these directives, combined with increasing casualties, and the odd defensive posture that all armies of occupation seem to develop – an anger about the lack of gratitude amongst those whom they are occupying – led to, what should have been, fairly predictable results. Again, one example from the Army’s investigation into Abu Ghraib, led by Lt. Gen. Anthony R. Jones and Maj. Gen. George R. Fay, cited by Strasser, will have to do for many: “On another occasion DETAINEE-07 was forced to lie down while M.P.’s jumped onto his back and legs. He was beaten with a broom and a chemical light was broken and poured over his body. . . . During this abuse a police stick was used to sodomize DETAINEE-07 and two female M.P.’s were hitting him, throwing a ball at his penis, and taking photographs.” I was resident in the United States when these stories, if not the actual pictures,³ became public, and for the most part, the reactions were muted. Much more attention, for example, was paid to the credibility of John Kerry’s three Purple Hearts or the shoddiness of the incumbent’s service in the Texas Air National Guard in a war more than thirty years old than in examining this issue. Lynndie England, one of the American women who was involved in (and clearly seemed to enjoy) much of the abuse did for a moment emerge as the trailer park female anti-hero to the previously

² Given this publicly produced contempt for international legal standards, one can only admire the *hutzpah* of US Legal team invoking the Geneva Conventions prohibition against the humiliation of prisoners when defending the Bush Administration’s rejection of the ACLU’s Freedom of Information request for the release of more photographs and videos from Abu Ghraib. In the event, this strategy was unsuccessful, so barring the Supreme Court agreeing to hear the case, at least 100 more photographs and two more videos will be in the public domain by July 05.

³ The best-known pictures from Abu Ghraib seem to have all been taken on one night, and the best-known of these, the hooded man on some crates threatened with electrical shocks, however disturbing, show what is clearly amongst the least reprehensible activities that are documented. Many prisoners, for example, died under “interrogation” (in other words were tortured to death). Their exact number is unknown, but it may well run into scores, and, of course, we have only a portion of the evidence available for public inspection. The overtly sexualized nature of the violence, moreover, has only been hinted at in the mass media, but was clearly an important theme in prisoner mistreatment (For a very early analysis of the scale (and nature) of the abuse, see Human Rights Watch 2004, also 2005).

valorized Jessica Lynch,⁴ but the issue of torture-as-American-policy seemed to barely register.

This looks a lot like bad faith – knowing something is there and pretending that it is not, perhaps, at best, hoping that it will all go away. A review of the first two volumes, then, could legitimately end at this point. Americans, individually and collectively, look pretty bad in all this, but, oddly enough, America as a country does not. Abu Ghraib looks like an aberration, albeit a horrible one, but one whose exposure shows the functioning of America’s military as more or less ethical, and, further, the fact of the investigation provides evidence of the United States’s status as an open society. With its high ideals tarnished by a few bad apples, America still must show the moral fortitude to “stay the course” and build a democratic Iraq to provide a happy dénouement to this unfortunate chapter in “our” history.

There is, however, a second set of questions that might be asked about Abu Ghraib. These look not at its exotic qualities, but at its more mundane ones. This set of questions focuses not on the military aspect of these centers of confinement, but on their existence as *prisons*. There have been only sporadic efforts to connect Abu Ghraib and the activities of other centers of detention in the Iraq and Afghanistan adventures with the domestic prison system (and broader economic issues) in the United States.⁵ Because of the writings of Naomi Klein and a few other authors, for example, at least some people by now are aware that both Army Specialists Graner and Frederick, two members of the unit (the 372nd Military Police Company) involved in the activities in most of the widely-known pictures, had backgrounds in the Corrections System in the US, but little beyond this connection has been developed, and it certainly has not

⁴ Jessica Lynch is a female private from very humble roots in West Virginia who was severely wounded when her convoy was attacked and more or less destroyed in the early stages of the war. She was turned over, in critical condition, to an Iraqi hospital whose personnel treated her as best they were able, given the scarcity of supplies, and informed the Americans of her presence. Iraqi medical personnel then tried to return her to a US position but were driven back by small arms fire. She was subsequently “rescued” from her situation by American Special Forces who conveniently filmed their assault. Beyond these “facts” much is hazy about her story. The American military initially produced her as a sort of female Rambo who left a wall of dead Iraqis around her position until she ran out of ammunition. It turned out that her weapon had not been fired, but some aspects of this story might have applied to one of her colleagues, a Panamanian-American woman, Shoshana Johnson (who was also severely wounded in the attack). The Army then retracted this story, but insisted that Lynch was, in fact, being mistreated by Iraqi interrogators when she was rescued (in particular that she had been sodomized). This story, too, has been challenged, but still hovers around the official version of events, and is supported by her biographer. As Lynch was unconscious during much of the ordeal, no definitive version emerged, but all commentators agreed that she was a Real American Hero, and, in the event, her “story” was quickly produced in a made-for-TV movie.

⁵ An important exception to this statement is the prison reform/activist literature that has been highly critical of America’s new Great Confinement since the days of the Reagan Administration. Amongst more mainstream authors, it is really only Naomi Klein (e.g., *Guardian Unlimited*, May 18, 2004) who has expressly connected America’s carceral infrastructure, its macroeconomic trends, and some of the more unsavoury aspects of the war in Iraq or the general War on Terror (see also, Dow 2004, Elsner 2005).

been produced as part of “the scandal at Abu Ghraib” in the sense that I use the term above.

Some liberal punditry in the US has, however, been more attracted to the human side of this drama. Charles Graner, for example, has garnered some notoriety for his taste in attack dogs, his obvious relish for inflicting pain and humiliation, as well as for one of the women in his life (he and Lynndie England now have a baby together, with some of their sex acts also apparently having been recorded for posterity). This part of the story, though, ends with a whimper, as, in the end, Graner put up a very weak defence to the charges of prisoner abuse, quietly accepting a dishonourable discharge and a ten-year prison sentence (out of a potential fifteen), despite the extensive documentation available that seemingly should have allowed him to implicate officers far higher up the chain of command to mitigate his own guilt.⁶

What makes Graner more interesting, it seems to me, are his more quotidian qualities. A long-time member of the National Guard and involved at entry-level jobs in a couple of prisons in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, this is a man used to taking orders.⁷ It is hard to believe that he would have initiated either the elaborate staging, or the extensive documentation of this abuse unless he thought these activities were condoned, even encouraged. According to a now infamous Washington Post piece, cited in the Strasser volume (as well as in *The Road to Abu Ghraib* by Human Rights Watch, amongst many others), one sergeant who witnessed the torture thought Military Intelligence did indeed approve of all of it: “The M.I. staffs, to my understanding, have been giving Graner compliments on the way he has been handling the M.I. holds [i.e., prisoners held by military intelligence].” Example being statements like “Good job, they’re breaking down real fast”; “They answer every question;” “They’re giving out good information, finally;” and “Keep up the good work” – stuff like that.” And, indeed, there is a variety of documents (as well as the testimony of some of those Americans accused of mistreating prisoners) showing that these individuals felt they were acting within the framework of directives from Washington.

Nonetheless, as far as the official voices in America are concerned, the search for “Scandal” at Abu Ghraib ends at this point: a couple of enlisted personnel have been charged with “abuse” and duly punished, one general in direct control of the prisons in Iraq, Gen. Janis Kaminski, has received a written reprimand for her

⁶ Given the history of Americans imprisoned for military crimes connected to mistreating or killing enemy soldiers or civilians, it is unlikely that Graner will serve anywhere near his full term.

⁷ I have no desire to reproduce the classist depictions of the 372nd MP Company. Such depictions of out-of-control white trash are already disturbingly common, connecting the “Left” and “Right” sides of this issue in the US. Liberal writers, like Seymour Hersh, who originally broke the Abu Ghraib story in a mainstream publication, for example, argued that these soldiers were too poor and uneducated to have thought up this stuff by themselves, therefore, they must have had directions from their betters. The right-wing commentators who have absorbed the seriousness of the abuse at Abu Ghraib make much of the number of trailer-parks in the backgrounds of these soldiers, implicitly constructing these people as bad-apple “crackers” pulling down the reputation of “our” glorious army.

negligence, as well as a demotion to Colonel (effectively ending her career in the military). The rest of the chain of command has been officially absolved of wrong-doing. The disturbing question, “Was/Is there an American policy allowing for, even encouraging, torture?” however, remains elusive, refractory to definitive answer. The connection of Abu Ghraib to anything found in America, furthermore, seems impossible to imagine. “Scandal” in this sense is like a storm, something to be weathered, and something fated to subside.

It is impossible, however, to read Angela Davis’s illuminating analysis of why so many Americans are imprisoned by other Americans, in so many brutal and violent places, and be satisfied with such an understanding of Abu Ghraib. Only months before the “breaking” of the Abu Ghraib story (but with stories of the abuse of detainees having obtained the status of persistent rumour, Davis penned a pithy Prison Abolitionist Manifesto, a state of affairs difficult to imagine at the present moment, but from her perspective, the necessary theoretical stance from which to view the prison system in the United States *as a system*. Understanding the system of domestic imprisonment, it seems to me, takes us a long way towards understanding many aspects of the current military interventions in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Davis’s starting point is the sheer size of the carceral infrastructure in the United States. As of 2003, America had more than 2.1 million men, women, and children in prison, jails, and detention centers, and this number swells yearly. The total population of prisoners on the planet in the early years of this new millennium, however, has hovered around 9 million. To put it another way, with less than one twentieth of the world’s population, the United States now has nearly one quarter of the global population of prisoners, with that proportion looking likely to increase in the next few years.

Despite this prison-building boom, overcrowding continues to worsen, and violence and brutality in American prisons remains a persistent, if largely hidden, and certainly under-investigated, problem. There is not the space in this piece to examine the issue of sexualized violence in prisons, but its reality is undeniable and the threat of particularly dangerous prisons or prison blocks remains an effective means of securing intelligence or punishing rebellion from inmates inside, or from people in trouble with the law outside. The signatures of this sort of violence can be seen in various corners of popular culture, from off-hand references in everything from Gangsta Rap to the middle-class-directed *Law and Order*. It is documented in ethnographic depictions of populations with experience of regular imprisonment (Bourgeois 2002, Fliasher 1995). Its more direct reality is revealed in the occasional scandal, such as in 1997, when Haitian immigrant Abner Louima was beaten and sodomized with a broomstick in bathroom of precinct stationhouse while in the custody of the 70th Precinct of the

New York Police Department, an incident with disturbing resonances to the abuse at Abu Ghraib.⁸

As Davis also points out, the United States has been the global leader in ceding prison and security services to private for-profit corporations. Many low- and medium-security facilities and even a few high-security ones, for example, are now run as private enterprises, some quite profitably. Indeed, this connection between mass incarceration of poor (often black and brown) men and women, the expansion of budgets to build and run prisons (often in the face of shrinking government commitments to health, education, and welfare), and the successful reproduction of private capital around and within prisons has become so tightly bound together that many activists and some social scientists now speak of a “prison mode of production” or the “gulag economy.” In this cycle of public-private capital flows, land (often formerly agricultural land no longer profitable for corporate farming, generally in areas losing population and tax base) is purchased at above-market value from its private owners, a lavish building developed, and a large, captive (generally urban) population in need of (at least) basic services introduced. This process creates jobs (often more unionized than the rest of the so-called unskilled economy, and certainly more recession-proof). These jobs are disproportionately filled by the white working class, whose traditional route into the middle classes has been severely restricted by the outsourcing of lower-skilled, but, in the previous generation, reasonably well-paid, unionized manufacturing jobs. Prison Reformer, Van Jones, for example, points out that Spc. Frederick at Abu Ghraib had a decent job at the Bausch & Lomb factory in Mountain Lake, Md., until it shut down and moved to Mexico - one of the nearly 900,000 jobs that the Economic Policy Institute estimates have been lost since NAFTA. Indeed, Klein has called the attractiveness of the military for folks like England, Graner and Frederick, especially the often-oversold college assistance supposedly available after one’s military enlistment is over, the “NAFTA draft” (Klein 2005).

This sort of merging of state, economy, and civil society under the aegis of corporate governance goes some way to making sense of an extremely interesting, but very under-examined, aspect of the War on Terror, that is, the proliferation of private “security” options in both Afghanistan and Iraq. This odd mixture, from the perspective of bourgeois political theory, which posits obvious boundaries between the state, the economy, and civil society, was clearly field-tested in the US Prison System. Major corporations, like Wackenhut, for example, have been running large, uniformed, generally armed, private security forces and full-scale centers of confinement in the US for more than a decade. This recent history of the US prison system inflects the interpretation of some facts that have emerged out of the Abu Ghraib “scandal.” At least four out of the six prison governors in Iraq, for example, come from state prison systems in the US, with accusations of

⁸ The situation at the NYPD’s 70th Precinct where this assault occurred was almost too bizarre for fiction. One of the accused Officers, Justin Volpe, pleaded an insanity defense in his criminal trial, that he was in a fit of “roid rage.” Further investigation yielded evidence of an active, police-led drug ring, with anabolic steroids being especially popular with the cops in the 70th.

ignoring brutality in their careers. To be sure, such a background might have desensitized them to the abuses in Iraqi prisons. More importantly, however, it probably tended to normalize this merging of state servants and private contractors that has made the apportioning of blame much higher than the Privates who physically meted out the torment such a difficult task for the investigators of the activities at Abu Ghraib.⁹

This contracting out of aspects of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence has garnered nowhere near the attention that it deserves. We are not talking about numerically small, elite forces like the English-based *Executive Outcomes*, subverting or supporting shaky state structures in Africa, but the widespread use of "private contractors" in the biggest deployment of the largest military establishment in the world for more than thirty years. In the War on Terror, "Private Contractors" now guard both military and civilian sites, provide support services, patrol hostile territory, engage in firefights, and even run certain prisons and collect intelligence. In short, their functions are practically indistinguishable from those of national militaries. It is impossible to get a reliable estimate of these forces, but they are only exceeded by the American and, and perhaps the British,¹⁰ contingent in the "Coalition of the Willing." They have certainly been useful to "real" military planners who did not anticipate the ability of despised "Rag-heads" and "Hadjis"¹¹ to resist shock and awe tactics. They also provide plausible deniability for military and civilian leaders when a scandal is uncovered (as recently occurred in a prison in Afghanistan). Finally, they represent a pool of people to put in harm's way who do not need to be counted as casualties on the evening news, if things should happen to go wrong.¹²

⁹ One of the persistent rumours that the United States Military has been keen to deny, for example, is the presence of Israeli Military Intelligence during the mistreatment at Abu Ghraib. Certain practices that Detainees have experienced at American hands, such as water-boarding (simulated drowning), and hooding (faeces-soiled sacks covering the head for many hours) have been well documented in Israeli Defence Forces and Christian Militia mistreatment of prisoners in southern Lebanon, although these and other equally unsavoury techniques have also been in CIA "training manuals" in the public domain for decades. The normalization of "private contractors" in the war on terror, especially the easy movement of skilled soldiers between military and militarised civilian employment, however, makes the presence or absence of foreign military personnel difficult to determine and nearly impossible to prove. Like the Academy, the American Military has learned the value of short-term contract workers in making themselves more competitive in the global marketplace. The current contracting out of the harsher interrogations that we are witnessing in the US to countries like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, with fewer legal protections for detainees, is so similar to corporate outsourcing of production processes that are too dangerous and/or too environmentally unsound, for American laws, as to need little elaboration.

¹⁰ The estimates of these forces, like nearly all the other numbers connected to this war, are subject to much debate. The highest figures available are upwards of 20,000 armed mercenaries (out of 40,000 or so private employees in the deployment). The former figure would be about double the current British contingent, the only other significant military force in this "coalition" besides the American one. For an outline of this privatization of the means of waging war, see Singer 2004.

¹¹ These terms of abuse are currently popular with those administering the American occupation.

¹² The first Coalition assault on Falujah was, of course precipitated by the killing and post-mortem mutilation of four such armed "contractors." These mercenaries were operating in circumstances

De-exoticising Abu Ghraib, then, requires the recognition of what has become “normal,” not just in the “War on Terror,” not only in the US, but throughout the world: tightly integrated flows of capital, symbols, peoples and commodities, an enormous imbalance in military power, astonishing levels of technical virtuosity, and vast and widening inequalities both within and between polities (as well as the necessity of the security muscle to maintain this state of affairs), the whole of which is increasingly under corporate governance. These are rapidly becoming the primary structures in which we live. The photographs at Abu Ghraib of white prison guards abusing brown prisoners and its subsequent management as “scandal” strike a cord in all this for various reasons. At least in the US, they produce visual evidence of a situation that we regularly misrecognize, that is, just how common this color-coded prison tableau is in modern America, if not in all its ugly detail, then in its general outline. Like all images returned from repression, though, the images from Abu Ghraib are also eerily recognizable for consumers who may have no first-, or even second-, hand experience of America’s vast carceral infrastructure. Rush Limbaugh, the conservative radio talk-show host, for example, saw simple college fraternity hazing practices in the human pyramid of abject naked Iraqis being surveyed by a grinning US MPs. The question is not the sincerity of his depiction (or indeed the level of humiliation Rush endured to be “accepted” by other males in his youth). Instead, it is the persuasiveness of this argument of images (to use James Fernandez’s apt phrasing) for Rush’s legions of listeners. Even more interesting, perhaps, are examples, in the wake of the “revelations,” of what seems to be the new way that the culture-at-large exorcises the spectres of the zeitgeist. Reality Television, at least in Europe, is now making space for the torture of “real” people, as if the rag-heads and Hadjis in these pictures are movie stars, in the same way that it normalized the ubiquity of surveillance technologies a few years ago in the odious Big Brother. These new archipelagoes of confinement and the circulation of images about them, then, stand as points of eruption of flows of people, capital, commodities, and symbols, that are generally invisible and taken for granted. This aspect of “the scandal” makes the current imbalance between the published information on such places as Abu Ghraib and anything that can rightfully be called theorizing about this mass of information, in William James’s sense of a stubborn attempt to think clearly about something, even harder to understand.

It seems to me that the beginning of this theorizing of Abu Ghraib starts from recognizing its crucial positioning at the intersection of domestic and foreign fears in the United States. Abu Ghraib is the offspring of the political marriage of those sections of American society doing well on the back of widening domestic inequalities, who are committed to American unilateralism (if not imperialism) in

that were never clarified. This assault encountered stiff resistance and was discontinued after US casualties began to mount. After the Presidential Election in the US, Falujah was subsequently all but destroyed in an “all out” assault that (according to official estimates) claimed the lives of over one thousand insurgents. Many times that number of Iraqi civilians must have died in the widespread destruction of a city that before the conflict numbered nearly 300,000 people, but no count of this total has been made public.

foreign affairs, and the post-1984 Christian Right, with its attendant “tough on crime” stance at home, its lionization of Zionism abroad, and its epistemological literalism throughout. These two lines of force in modern American society are connected, albeit unequally, to interlocking and unstable material and symbolic economies. The first a corporate-led global capitalism caught between the exporting of decent jobs and the importing of cheap goods, finite resources, and a shaky reserve currency, on the one hand, and, on the other, a symbolic economy involved in a never-ending search for, and fight against, external, personifiable evil as the privileged means of reducing social and personal anxiety. In this historical moment, tragedy and farce are interestingly telescoped. Indeed, the current situation produces a surfeit of the raw material for irony – a formerly AWOL commander-in-chief declaring “mission accomplished,” when the local resistance to his military adventure is intensifying; or the solemn declaration of the “end of torture chambers in the new Iraq” almost at the very moment that the Abu Ghraib scandal was breaking – but it seems to restrict the subject positions for the consumption of such tropes. A discipline which prides itself on its interest in the functioning and reproduction of systems of meaning and power, of the relationship, in the life-world of individuals, of motivations, actions, and reflection, and of the interconnection of people, images and processes in our current moment of globalization should have ample ground to till here.

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