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The Ticking Bomb, Torture & the CIA

WE SHOULD ALL BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE NORMALISATION OF TORTURE

11/05/2018 Michael Eden News



The use of torture is wrong! Isn't it? The appointment of Gina Haspel as the new CIA Chief has sparked off the debate around torture and its role in the military interrogation methods sanctioned by those like Haspel, in power,

"In a contentious hearing that reopened the painful debate over CIA abuse of terrorism suspects, Gina Haspel pledged Wednesday she would not revive the use of secret prisons and harsh interrogations if she is confirmed to lead the nation's premier intelligence agency," Chris Megegan, LA Times, 2018 full article [here](#)



Gina Haspel CIA Director 2018

Protestors were forcibly removed from the chamber as Haspel avoided questions about her opinion on the use of torture. We may have cause for concern since Haspel has in the past sanctioned torture and she will be serving a president, Trump, who has on many occasions voiced his support for the uses of torture; not privately but candidly and on film, as is his style.

British Secret Service MI5 & MI6

Just in case we started to feel morally superior here in the UK it transpired that MI6 were involved in the cruel betrayal of Abdel Hakim Belhaj and Sami al-Saadi; enemies of Gaddafi traded back to the dictator after being critical of his regime,



"These papers showed beyond doubt that all three agencies had been involved in the kidnap and torture of two of Gaddafi's opponents, Abdel Hakim Belhaj and Sami al-Saadi. Moreover, they had also been involved in the kidnap and severe mistreatment of the men's wives, Fatima Boudchar and Karima al-Saadi, and Saadi's four children, the youngest aged six. Boudchar was four and a half months pregnant when she was kidnapped," Ian Cobain, 2018

British secret services have form for this recall that MI5 'directly colluded' in similar activities revealed in 2009,

"MI5 directly colluded in the savage 'medieval' torture in Morocco of Binayam Mohamed, the Guantanamo inmate who was last week released to live in Britain," David Rose, 2009

It's difficult to imagine the great moral icons of the world endorsing torture; the Judaeo-Christian tradition is certainly opposed, Christ was tortured and his famous utterance, 'look how I make all things anew' predicted the elevation of his crucifixion to the status of an iconic symbol, one which undermined the Roman strongman morality and turned the value system on its head; after that point strength and power did not make a person good rather self sacrifice altruistic acts defined goodness. Its difficult to imagine Buddha endorsing the water boarding of another sacred living being or Mohamed ordering that someone have his finger nails pulled out.

Never the less torture exists and has been practiced by many states for its practical benefits. In recent times we have been bombarded by representations of the practical benefits of torture think of 24,



Jack Bauer interrogating a witness in 24

To help to give the idea a context we can consider the film 'Zero Dark Thirty' 2012 directed by Kathryn Bigelow as an example of an elaborate and fleshed out story around this topic. The film is about the historic hunt for Osama bin-Laden and the American forces methods including the use of torture to obtain information.

What is torture in the 21st century?

There are depressingly many forms of torture used and by most powerful states, but lets consider one which is purported to work extremely well, water boarding. Water boarding effectively drowns the subject perpetually, allowing the torturer to remain in control of the subject stopping them from dying then repeating the process. Every time you take a breath through the cloth you are drowning as water is poured through it at a slow steady pace. if you stop breathing you are holding your breath, as you breath in the cloth tightens and increases the feeling of suffocation. Drowning is extremely painful and leads directly to panic as the subject is kept at the edge of death, the process can be kept up for prolonged periods of time since the subject is not bleeding or being impacted by blows which are harder to manage.

The journalist and iconoclast Christopher Hitchens, sadly now passed away (from cancer) took issue with an attempt by the government and media to brand water boarding as enhanced interrogation; he volunteered to be water boarded by special forces operatives in a compelling clip,

"...on top of the hood, three layers of enveloping towel were added. In this pregnant darkness, head downward, I waited until I abruptly felt a slow cascade of water going up my nose ... I held my breath for a while and then had to exhale and - as you might expect - inhale in turn."That, he says, "brought the damp cloths tight against my nostrils, as if a huge, wet paw had been suddenly and annihilatingly clamped over my face. Unable to determine whether I was breathing in or out, flooded more with sheer panic than with water, I triggered the pre-arranged signal" and felt the "unbelievable relief" of being pulled upright," Hitchens quoted in the Guardian 2008



Christopher Hitchens Water boarded by special forces experts

Hitchens purpose is to challenge the attempt by certain authorities to label certain kinds of torture as, 'advanced interrogation techniques' maintaining that the methods used are torture and we should not delude ourselves that they aren't, lest we want to lose many liberal freedoms we hold dear, for this he is willing to be tortured so he can attest to the fact. Assuming that we are not governed by sadists we can ask, what prompts reasonable people to support torture?

The 'ticking bomb' problem

Versions of this thought experiment are taught in many ethics classes and we may be subject to both the question and the answer in films like Zero Dark Thirty,

The problem that even the most virtuous people face when thinking about torture is whether there is ever a case where a good result produced by torture justifies the evil act of torturing someone

It's often illustrated by a version of the 'ticking bomb problem', which asks us to put ourselves in the position of a senior law officer facing a situation like this:

- A terrorist group states that it has concealed a bomb in London
- The authorities have captured the leader of the group
- He says that he knows where the bomb is
- He refuses to reveal the location

Do you torture him?

The Ticking Bomb in Popular Culture

'Zero Dark Thirty' is a 2012 film directed by the kathryn Bigelow billed as "the greatest manhunt in history", the film portrays the manhunt for Osama bin Laden after the September 11 attacks in the United States. This search eventually leads to the discovery of Bin Laden and his death on May 2, 2011. The film includes a scene of waterboarding and appears to condone the act as an unpleasant necessity although the director denies this claiming she is depicting the facts neutrally.

We mythologise and therefore rationalise real historical events very quickly in the 21st century, films like 'Zero Dark Thirty' reflect on the real events but can they ever be neutral as Bigelow claims?

"Those of us who work in the arts know that depiction is not endorsement. If it was, no artist would be able to paint inhumane practices, no author could write about them, and no filmmaker could delve into the thorny subjects of our time."Kathryn Bigelow, LA Times Letter

Zizek challenges this in his 2013 article, "Zero Dark Thirty: Hollywood's gift to American power"

"Imagine a documentary that depicted the Holocaust in a cool, disinterested way as a big industrial-logistic operation, focusing on the technical problems involved (transport, disposal of the bodies, preventing panic among the prisoners to be gassed). Such a film would either embody a deeply immoral fascination with its topic, or it would count on the obscene neutrality of its style to engender dismay and horror in spectators. Where is Bigelow here? Without a shadow of a doubt, she is on the side of the normalisation of torture," Zizek, 2013

Bigelow maintains that she is simply depicting the situation as it is but her depiction and so called neutrality is condemned as support since it presents torture as the only way to secure the nations safety. This approach can also be seen in popular TV programs like 24 where the ticking bomb problem is often used to justify ugly acts of extreme violence.

Does the problem itself act as a kind of manipulation? Is it a valid thought experiment?

The Philosopher

Zizek Maintains that there is more at stake than the immediate danger to people in any given context, the very fabric of our value system is devalued if we indulge in inhuman acts like torture, he also maintains that the 'ticking bomb' context is already a manipulation which takes account only of the problem at its near close rather than looking at the routes of these problems or alternatives which would attack these causes.

That adds a secular atheist Marxist as well as a respected journalist to the religious figures mentioned previously, would you sanction torture?

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 Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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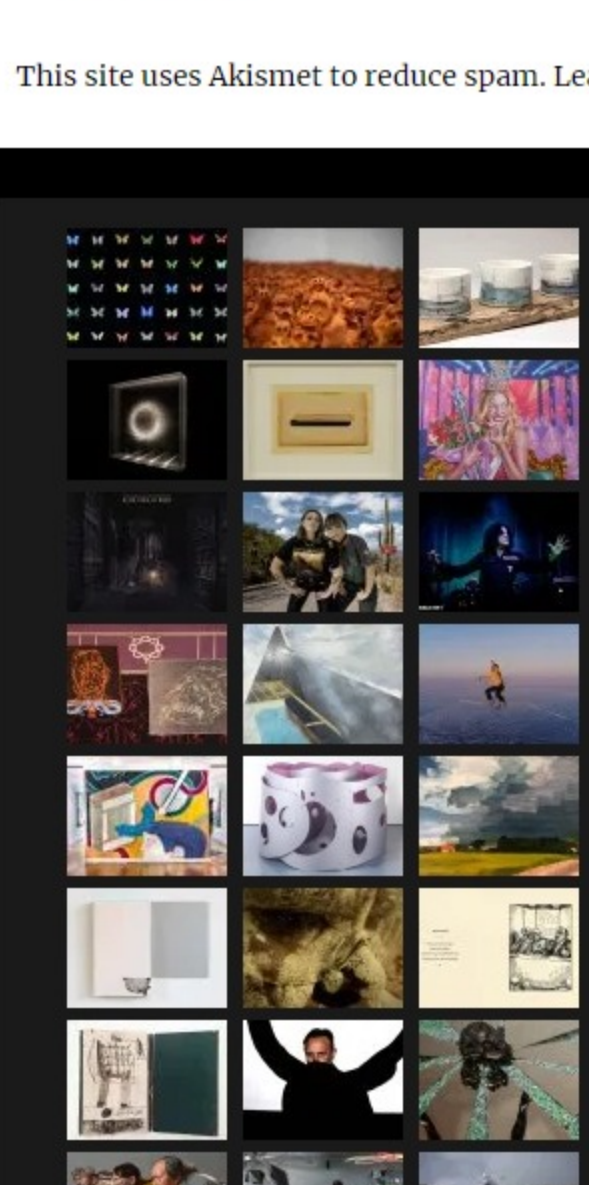
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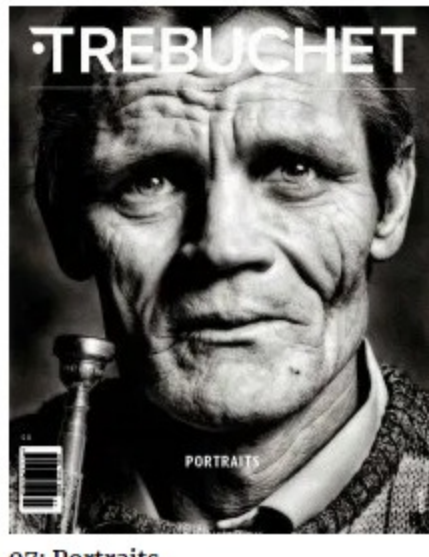
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