



THE MORAL COST OF TORTURE

DR ANTHONY MARSELLA was a Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii. He is a consultant to numerous national and international agencies. Dr Marsella is widely known as a pioneer figure in the study of culture and psychopathology. He has challenged ethnocentrism in theories and practices in psychology and psychiatry. He has recently been involved in the creation of *Psychologists for Social Responsibility*, an organisation that promotes peace and social justice. He spoke to JORGE AROCHE and OLGA YOLDI during his visit to Australia.

OY: You have written in the past that “psychologists exist to heal, cure and support those in need, that they there to serve humanity and improve the human condition.”

Recently you played a major role in creating *Psychologists for Social Responsibility*, a US organisation that stands against torture. If psychologists are healers, what is their connection with torture?

AM: *Psychologists for Social Responsibility* is a national organisation but it is now establishing an international network. Its members are psychologists around the world who are concerned with issues of peace and social justice. At the moment we are particularly concerned with the use of psychologists in the exercise of torture and the use of psychology in violation of human rights.

While the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association and the American Bar Association have condemned torture and professionals participating in it, the American Psychological Association (APA) has been unwilling to offer the same response, leaving in doubt its commitment to human rights and justice.

The APA says that if psychologists are present, they can actually prevent some of the problems associated with the exercise of torture, rather than being part of the problem. But *Psychologists for Social Responsibility* has challenged this assumption. The use of psychological knowledge about interrogation during torture places psychology in a leadership role whenever torture is conducted.

Many psychologists never imagined that their studies of social influence, obedience, propaganda, communication, sensory deprivation, sleeplessness, noise and related areas would be picked up by

military and security organisations and used in torture. They never imagined that the President of the United States would approve using such research for torturing military prisoners. However this is happening, their knowledge –and often their participation – has been used for torture.

We want the APA to adopt a position to prevent psychologists participating, in any way, in torture. In fact, a number of psychologists have proposed and signed a resolution that states: “Be it resolved that psychologists may not work in settings where persons are held outside of, or in violation of, either International Law or the US Constitution, unless they are working directly for the persons being detained or for an independent third party working to protect human rights.”

It is unfortunate that the APA board has not chosen to join others in rejecting participation by psychologists. Why is that the case? APA is located in Washington DC. It is a professional and scientific organisation that lobbies the government for its own interests. It does not want to alienate the government. Also much government funding for research and services goes to psychologists and this could be turned off quickly by angry government officials. In addition, many of the APA members are working with government and military industries and the anti torture position may conflict with accepted views.

The issue of torture is not only important for psychologists but also for our very nation. What is our stake is our moral authority in the world. The US Administration has simply used the notion that torture is an essential tool for our national defense. Recently George Bush vetoed efforts to declare *water boarding* a method of torture. In fact he has had the audacity to say that the use of torture may be necessary to protect America.

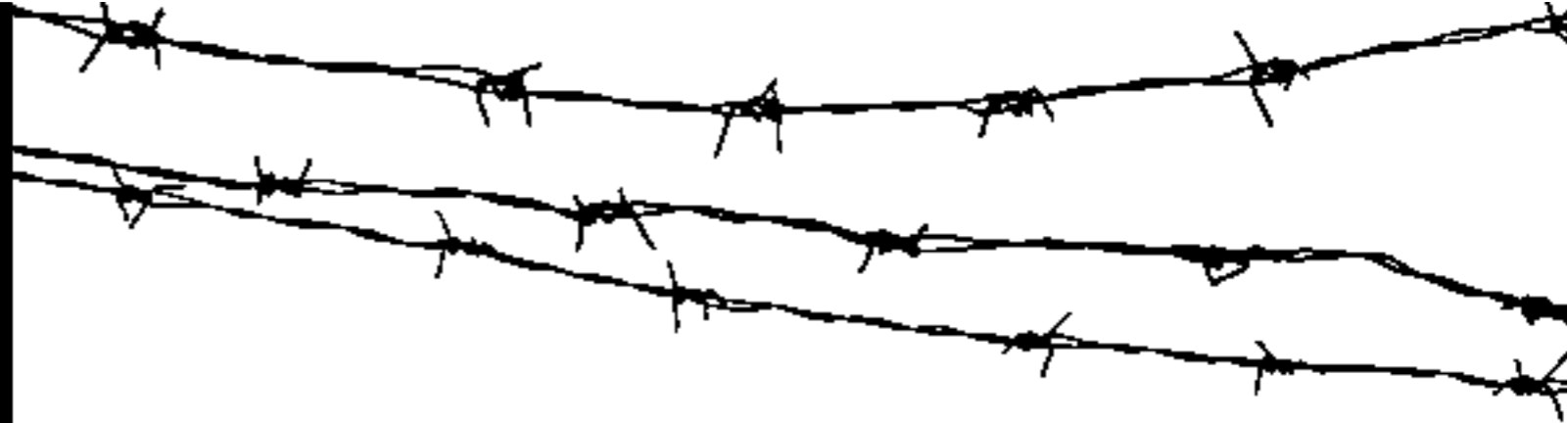
This kind of rabid nationalism, this fear of non-existent provocation is consistent with many political leaders throughout history who sought to control and dominate people by creating fear and anxiety, so that they would increasingly rely upon their national leader for protection. This is an old trick used by dictators.

Unfortunately the media has failed to respond and the American public has been taken in by all this propaganda, so resistance has not been as widespread as we would like it to be. It would be wonderful if throughout the US all organisations as well as people would simply say to the government: what are you doing? Stop it! It is against the law! You are destroying our national character and integrity.

I guess Americans have trusted their government in the past. The Bush Administration’s dishonesty, corruption and immorality has brought the US and the world to the brink of economic, political, military and moral destruction.

At the moment the message is quite confusing. On the one hand Bush says: “We refuse to be part of this. America does not torture” and on the other hand we know what happened in Abu Graib, in Guantanamo, in Kandahar and in Rendition. We also know that the Pentagon has decided to eliminate some of the Geneva Convention restrictions on Torture from its army training manual and the highest members of the US administration have had meetings in which they have authorised and actually orchestrated torture activities.

So this duplicity along with the very act of permitting torture itself, has a heavy cost on America because in the eyes of the world we have lost our moral authority. We have lost whatever role and stature we had. We are no longer the voice for democracy, freedom and justice.



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JA: The same thing happened with psychologists in England. Why is it that the Medical Association, the Nursing Association have taken a stand against torture while psychologists haven't?

AM: The idea that physicians would participate in the exercise of torture brings back the spectrum of Dr Mengele and the Nazi death camps and the whole assault upon medicine after physicians engaged in these horrible acts. The Medical Association has said "no, we are healers, we are not destroyers and we won't tolerate anybody that commits to that". The Law Association said the same thing, "we are here to support the law. We cannot participate."

But psychology is an interesting discipline. It is a discipline that has its roots and applications in so many different fields. It is what we call a hub discipline because it enters so many different areas: athletics, mathematics, teaching, business, clinical work, to name a few and so it doesn't have the same uniformity.

At some point psychologists may question professional freedom and ask why they can't study how people influence one another, why and how people control one another. Psychologists say, "Are you saying that we must stop studying these topics?" When we can use this knowledge within a criminal justice situation to interrogate criminals and prevent crimes.

But many psychologists -I would say 'virtually' all psychologists- are against torture. Many are now changing their views on it because we now understand the consequences of our actions because psychologists who are part of the torture equation will not only lose the public trust but their own integrity.

So we are hopeful that as we form and promote *Psychologists for Social Responsibility* we will be able to influence others. Here in Australia there is a strong group of psychologists against torture who have spoken out courageously on the subject.

OY: Is there a crisis of values in the US?

AM: I think some of the myths that have sustained us in the past are falling apart. We have begun to see that so many of the values we were taught to believe in,

for instance the values of the capitalism system have turned out to be very destructive. We can now see this is a system that is based on exploitation, greed, profit-making and domination. Democracy itself is another myth. This very notion is constantly being used by the US Administration to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and ultimately dominate them. One almost sees this devil reaching out and saying "come, let me give you democracy", when in fact all it means really is sheer imperialism and occupation.

There are 735 American military bases outside the US. Why are they there? to bring democracy to other countries? In fact they are there to enforce American hegemonic control. And the US has participated in scores of political assassinations of foreign leaders. William Blum's book, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions since World War II* reveals the many sins of our past and present.

We are in need of a leadership that is visionary and moral, and a building of a new American character that acknowledges past failures and seeks to correct them.

A crisis in American values does exist and it is linked to the breakdown in the myths that guided us for centuries and the emerging realities that reveal that capitalism, democracy, freedom, unlimited opportunity, religion, equality and the US standing for justice, are simply myths that are collapsing.

The US involvement in torture is a very profound one. It strikes at the very core of our identity, of our history. In fact torture constitutes a war crime against humanity. It is a violation of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which were created at the end of WWII, as a result of the Nuremberg trials and the Japanese war crime trials. We are now violating those rights with such impunity, with such a disregard that so many of us stand in shock.

I guess we are witnessing the decline of America. It no longer has the position of prestige and respect that it enjoyed during the days after WWII when US soldiers were seen as saviors of Europe and the Pacific.

OY: How does torture affect the social fabric of a nation?

AM: We probably have in the US more than 700,000 victims of torture (domestic and international) and we have some very successful rehabilitation programs. So many people who have been tortured end up saying, how can you ever take away what happened to me? How can you ever heal it? Should I ever try to forget it? Or should I in fact keep the memory alive as much as it imposes a burden upon my mind and upon my family? Torture is the destruction of one's very essence as a human being. Many torturers eventually ask, what have I done? They themselves raise the questions: Am I human? How did I do this? How could I have done these things and now have no remorse?

We have seen the ramifications of torture, which tend to spread throughout the whole community and the whole nation.

This summer I will be presenting a paper about the History of Torture in Berlin at the National Congress of Psychology. The paper explores issues related to the moral disengagement experienced by torturers. We are also thinking of writing a Universal Declaration of Ethics for Psychologists.

OY: What involvement have psychologists actually had in the exercise of torture in the US?

AM: I had the privilege of reviewing Alfred McCoy's book on the *History of Torture and the CIA*. It is an extraordinary book. He is a professor of History at the University of Wisconsin and has traced the role of psychologists and their involvement in developing torture techniques. It was very interesting to read how psychologists were studying obedience, mind control and humiliation. Such techniques were collected with time and became part of the CIA's corpus of knowledge that can now be extended and developed into new techniques of torture.

This is to do with psychological torture, with methods that involve prolonged isolation, exposure to loud music, nudity, hypnosis, electro-convulsive shock, exposure to extreme temperatures,

denial of food. Today these methods are used under the rubric of sensory disorientation and self inflicted pain. They leave no physical marks. McCoy also mentions sleep deprivation, the presence of military working dogs for intimidation, sexual humiliation and threats to family members among others.

There is also the physical torture such as slapping, beatings, shackles and water boarding. All these approaches are used to create fear, dishonour, disorientation and confusion in a detainee's thoughts, feelings and identity.

Ultimately the aim is to break the detainee's resistance to obtain information. Of course, by this point, the torture victim may be insane or irrational and will say anything. McCoy's book is a scathing indictment of the CIA of the use and abuse of psychologists and psychology.

OY: What is it about human nature that makes an ordinary person become a torturer? How can one transgress the ethical and moral boundaries so easily?

AM: That question has become the topic of several books that have come out. One of this is Philip Zimbardo's book called *The Lucifer Effect, How do Normal People Engage in Evil Acts?*, while Donald Dutton's *Genocide, Massacres and Extreme Violence*, explores what leads normal people throughout history to engage in acts of such brutality.

We witnessed what happened in Rwanda where a group of people starting murdering others. Out of the 850,000 people who were killed 90 percent were killed by machetes. It means that you have to go up to someone with a knife, strike them, watch them die and then move on to the next one.

There can be no doubt that human beings are capable of enormous violence. History is testimony to that. There can be no doubt that we have the psychological and biological capacities to do so. The question you are asking is, in what conditions? Under what kind of threats are we

willing to do something so horrible?

Sister Diana Ortiz was in Guatemala teaching when she was captured by the right wing, she was massed raped and burnt with cigarettes while being raped and all this happened in the presence of the CIA and the Guatemalan troops. Why? How did they detach themselves?

The perpetrator must see the other person as not human. The terms we use are called 'dehumanisation' and 'enemification'. Once you declare someone to be an enemy, or a threat or danger, who has the potential to harm you or others, then at that point there is already a moral disengagement that occurs simply because I don't have to respond to you as a human being.

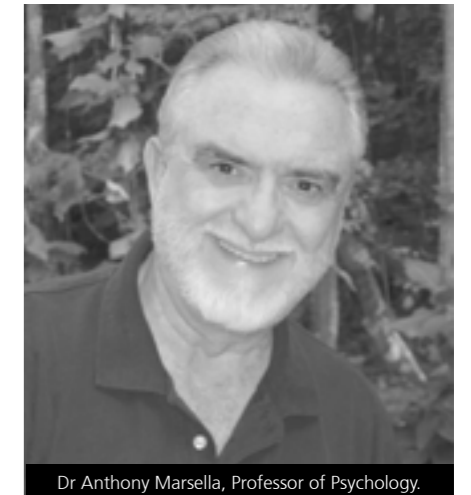
Throughout the history of slavery in the US members of the white establishment simply declared that blacks were not human. The British also said that the people they conquered were simply primitive people, not human.

Joseph Conrad in his book *Heart of Darkness* goes up a river into the jungle and he observes how vulnerable the blacks are. They are shot from a passing boat. The same happened in Australia with the shooting of Aborigines. It happened in the US with the American Indians. We deceived ourselves into thinking we are superior, better, moral, good and virtuous. Sometimes we even say 'god is on our side'. That certainly makes evil acts justifiable.

How is this process of enemification possible? Permission from authority, situations in which conventional morality is no longer accepted, intense emotions that overwhelm reason, drug abuse that dulls conscience and character flaws.

Some perpetrators are able to disengage because they are psychopaths. These are individuals who, by virtue of their temperament and upbringing, can easily engage in these acts and in fact enjoy them. Mass murderers engage in the most horrific kinds of torture before they kill people. And have no moral conscience. They often lack any emotional arousal.

There is a coldness and detachment from their actions.



Dr Anthony Marsella, Professor of Psychology.

Often torturers exercise torture under the effects of drugs or alcohol. A common excuse we hear all the time is that the authorities said to do it. You were expected to do it and if you expect to have a promotion, be recognised or commended you will engage in such behaviours.

The selling of nationalism makes torture possible. The idea that you are following orders, that you are doing it for your country, for your nation. This is what happened to soldiers during the Reich. They were getting rid of inferior people.

OY: Unfortunately much of the material regarding torture will never be known to the public.

AM: Correct, because it is protected under the mantle of national security. Yes this is very unfortunate. The value of the national security is questionable while the moral and security cost is considerable.

As McCoy says the use of psychological torture across the world by the American and many other governments has not led to any greater security. Indeed eventually the governments that endorse and use torture fall from within or are removed by rebellion and revolt. This was the case for Chile, The Philippines, Argentina, and the Shah's Iran. Is this what awaits the US? ■