

The Torturer's Smile as the Stain of Enjoyment

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Hilary Neroni, *The Subject of Torture: Psychoanalysis and Biopolitics in Television and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

In his well-known essay “Kant with Sade,”¹ Jacques Lacan claims that Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, is in fact the truth of Kant. That is to say, the Kantian respect for the moral law, according to Lacan, contains an unconscious enjoyment that possesses a certain sadistic characteristic. The respect for the moral law articulated by Kant is unknowingly tied to a sadistic pleasure in being able to cause pain and humiliation in the victim. The Sadist torturer acts, according to Lacan, as an *agent* of the moral law. Although for Kant there must remain a gap between the subject's pathological motivations and personal sentiments (feelings, personal desires, and so forth) and the moral law, there is, as Slavoj Žižek explains, “one a priori sentiment that the subject necessarily experiences when confronted with the injunction of the moral Law, the pain of humiliation.”² Žižek notes that for Lacan, the Kantian privileging of pain as the only a priori sentiment is correlative with the Sadean notion of pain as the privileged way to access sexual enjoyment. How might we consider Lacan's argument in the context of contemporary practices and representations of torture—torture, that is, as an arm of the law?

Hilary Neroni's *The Subject of Torture* takes up this question directly. The book is insightful and enjoyable, and it provides a considerably useful point of entry into a key debate in contemporary cultural and political theory. Its overarching focus is the debate between proponents of "biopolitics" and those of psychoanalysis. The book addresses the diverging critical and analytical perspectives of power that depend on the choice of the *body* or the *subject* as the site of knowledge. This debate is at the heart of current theories of subjectivity, power, and ideology, and in this book Neroni defends the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach, particularly a version of it influenced by Žižek and Joan Copjec.³

Interest in biopolitics and the body have developed out of critiques of Marxist and psychoanalytic conceptions of subjectivity. Though important in many respects—particularly when dealing with questions about racism and sex, for instance—a focus on the body seems to sidestep the role of desire and enjoyment and their connection to truth. In *The Subject of Torture*, which includes poignant psychoanalytically charged interpretations of popular films such as *Zero Dark Thirty*, the *Hostel*, and the *Saw* film series and television series such as *24*, *Homeland*, and *Alias*, Neroni contends that "biopolitics" is actually aligned with contemporary torture ideology and informs the predominant fantasy about torture. The "torture fantasy," as it is described by Neroni, is one that sees the body as a repository of information that, bound to its wish for mere corporeal survival, can be made to purge whatever details are deemed necessary for the enhancement of the security state. Neroni contrasts the biopolitical torture fantasy with the psychoanalytic conception of the desiring *subject*. Unlike the biopolitical *body*, the desiring subject is not a repository of information. Rather, it is based in an irrational (unconscious) experience of enjoyment. Therefore, on the one hand the reigning torture fantasy, the one that sees the body as repository, opens up an avenue for the critical interrogation of biopolitics and biopower that Neroni pursues, and on the other hand, according to Neroni, the psychoanalytic interpretation of the desiring subject shows precisely why torture as a technique of interrogation is bound to failure. Through her interpretation of various media representations of torture, Neroni shows that the limits of torture are tied to ideologies of the body and knowledge that miss the pathological dimension of libidinal pleasure. Her analyses also make a significant contribution to the psychoanalytic critique of ideology, and the book therefore proves useful beyond the limited scope of popular culture studies.

Michel Foucault is known for coining the terms "biopolitics"

and “biopower,” emphasizing the way that power exerts an influence on the body or is internalized by the disciplining of the body through technologies of power.⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,⁵ in their critique of Freudian psychoanalysis, also see psychoanalysis as repressive and the body as a potential site of resistance. Focus on the body and biopolitics have also more recently been developed in the writings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri⁶ as well as those of Giorgio Agamben,⁷ who all draw upon Foucault's original conception to write critically about the operation of contemporary forms of power. Neroni suggests that although these scholars provide a critical analysis of power, they share with the reigning ideology a conception of knowledge bound up with the body. She claims that biopolitics is the prevailing ideology of our epoch, therefore weakening the radical aspects of reactions to biopower. Torture, in fact, relies on a biopolitical conception of knowledge and biology as a way forward toward truth—not only torture but also other means of gathering information attached to the notion of security: biometric identification, fingerprinting, facial recognition technology, palm prints, iris and retina scans, and DNA evidence, for instance. What biopolitics cannot account for, though, is the irrational pleasure derived from self-destruction—that is, the paradox of the body that on the side of rationality vies for survival but on the side of the irrational constantly pursues self-destructive and harmful pleasures (excessive eating, for example) or even the very act of destroying the body as a form of resistance (suicide bombings and the like).

To that extent, a tying thread throughout the book is a return to the now infamous 2004 Abu Ghraib torture photographs. Though the photographs received much attention for the way they revealed the reality behind the rhetoric of the so-called enhanced interrogation techniques, there is, according to Neroni, something much more uncanny about them: that is, what they reveal about the enjoyment of the torturer. One photo in particular, that of U.S. Army specialist Sabrina Harmon leaning in close to a stacked pyramid of male Arab bodies, smiling and giving a thumbs up, is for Neroni quite telling. Citing Susan Sontag, Neroni notes that the Abu Ghraib torture photos were interweaved with pornographic photographs of members of the Military Police having sex with each other. Though the photographs depict torture, there is also a sexual theme attached to them. Some of the photos, in fact, show prisoners who were coerced to perform or stage sexual acts. These photographs demonstrate, for Neroni, what is missing or hidden behind the official justification for torture: the role of enjoyment

in torture that mixes experiences of sex and violence. Psychoanalysis, for Neroni, unlike the critique of biopower, provides an explanation for this seemingly strange relationship.

The origin of psychoanalysis, Neroni explains, “lies in the fact that subjects do not seek their own good but instead endeavor constantly to undermine their own self-interest. The problem for psychoanalysis is not aiding subjects in overcoming their egoism . . . but in helping them to avoid completely destroying themselves through their various modes of enjoyment” (25). The torture fantasy, and contemporary representations of torture in film and television, however, stick to the biopolitical conception of the body that clings to survival, therefore avoiding the way that desire and enjoyment distort the production and accessibility of knowledge and information. This is a mistake made by three prominent documentaries that Neroni discusses in her book: Erol Morris’s *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), Rory Kennedy’s *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2007), and Alex Gibney’s *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007). All three films, according to Neroni, are exceptional in detailing the facts behind the torture photographs. They share in the older notion of ideology critique that sees it as a problem of false consciousness, which can be rejected by revealing the facts. The facts, though, plain and simple, still miss out on and even ignore what is even more deeply problematic about ideology: the way that it relates to our *libidinal* investments in power.

Unlike documentary, fiction holds the potential to reproduce the dominant torture fantasy, while also providing a means toward challenging it, and even showing up the limits of torture. To this end, Neroni looks at the torture porn genre to highlight the way these films tie together torture with sexual and violent enjoyment. As she puts it, “torture porn films don’t simply represent the act of torture but thematize the enjoyment that derives from it” (72). Torture porn films, such as Eli Roth’s *Hostel* series and the *Saw* film series, reveal, according to Neroni, that contrary to the official justification, torture is “never about attaining information but instead aims at the domination and humiliation of the psyche” (73). What these films also depict is the fact that—in contrast to the biopolitical perspective—there is never a tortured body; there is only a tortured subject, which Neroni is keen to point out. By focusing on death and the survival of the body, questions about desire and enjoyment are neatly tucked away by popular justifications for torture, as depicted in TV shows such as *24*.

The series *24* adds a relevant dimension to the biopolitical justification of torture, according to Neroni: it adds the dimension of time or, more specifically, the counting down (ticking down)

of the clock. The ticking clock gives a sense of urgency and the time of the "right now," which, although Neroni doesn't pursue this line of argumentation, parallels the neoliberal and late capitalist erosion of the *beyond* of the now—it entraps us in a sense of a perpetual present, which older cultural theory referred to as the postmodern. The urgency of the right now is a convenient way for biopolitical logic to justify the practice of torture, limiting the time for reflection about its efficacy.

Unlike 24's "biodetective"—Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland)—who trusts in surveillance, torture, and biometric data, there is another image of the detective that Neroni calls the "detective of the real" (drawing upon the Lacanian notion of the Real, one of Lacan's three orders of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic). Characters such as *Homeland's* Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) and *Alias's* Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner)—the latter more so, according to Neroni, than the former—depict the detective of the Real who is more attuned to the way that desire distorts reality. These are characters who are capable of recognizing the role that desire and enjoyment play in our actions and our relationship with reality. On *Homeland*, Carrie is ultimately correct in recognizing the truth about Brody (Damien Lewis) because she "reads his desire." Similarly, Sydney Bristow is able to decipher the secret plots of her subjects by playing a fiction that elicits their desire. She creates a fiction that reveals the subject's fantasy that, as Neroni explains, "doesn't involve giving subjects what they desire but rather creating a scenario in which they can experience their desire" (142). Though it does not figure as one of her case studies, Neroni's interpretation of *Alias* might possibly apply as well to the late Cold War period espionage series *The Americans*, where a couple of KGB spies pose as a married American couple living in Washington, D.C. In this series, fiction and disguise, rather than torture, are used considerably as a mechanism for eliciting sexual desire, which on both sides (American and Soviet) shows up the truth that is being sought. Is, then, Neroni onto something here? Is sex a much more productive tool than torture for eliciting the truth?

Through her interpretation of popular representations of torture in the case studies discussed, Neroni concludes that torture is ultimately doomed to failure, primarily because it mistakes the body for the subject of truth. Because it places a focus on the body, it is always limited. The official justification of torture—that the body is a repository of information—resists considering the way that desire distorts reality. Although the interpretations provided by Neroni are useful for critiquing the ideology of torture, it is her analysis of torture that adds to the psychoanalytic critique of

biopolitics that makes this book a necessary read for those who are interested in contemporary debates about subjectivity, ideology, and power.

Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006).

2. Slavoj Žižek, "Kant and Sade: The Ideal Couple," *Lacanian Ink* 13 (1998), <http://www.lacan.com/zizlacan4.htm>.

3. The influence from texts such as Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989) and Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994) is evident throughout this book.

4. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978–1979*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

5. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

6. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

7. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).