

# ***HUMAN NATURE***

## **Preface to a History of Psychology and Torture**

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In August of this year, the 148,000-member American Psychological Association voted overwhelmingly to defeat a measure that would have denied the right of its members to participate in interrogation of prisoners in U.S. detention centers. While the APA did not ban psychologists from participating in interrogations as a matter of general principle, it did prohibit them from involvement in a specified list of methods of interrogation, including mock executions, sleep deprivation and sexual humiliation. This selective procedure obviously leaves open the question of which particular forms of torture are still regarded as acceptable. And it could not have escaped anyone's notice that what is likely the most potent form of torture, sensory deprivation, was not among the prohibited practices.

It may appear to some that the emergence of the issue of torture in regard to the American Psychological Association is a surprising departure from a generally humanistic past. Such a view would be thoroughly and dangerously mistaken. The truth is that from its inception, American psychology has harbored and nurtured tendencies that, understood within larger social and political pressures supporting racism, colonialism, imperialism, human domination and manipulation, make readily understandable how these psychological currents could well lead to the present involvement of professional psychology in the cloaking and facilitation of torture.

The combination of Germany's defeat at the hands of Napoleon and its material underdevelopment in conjunction with its intellectual ambitions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led the Kaiser to maintain that "The state must replace with intellectual strength what it has lost in material resources." It was in response to this directive that William von Humboldt drew up plans for the new German university, which was intended to integrate "Wissenschaft," that is, "science," in the German sense of principled knowledge, and "Bildung," as "the spiritual and moral training of the nation. It is crucial to realize that the German system intended to integrate these tendencies. Wundt, who is usually regarded as the founder of psychology in its modern experimental, quantifiable form, was a major representative of this intention.

The German cultural elite prided itself on the integration of philosophical and theological knowledge with other forms of disciplined understanding, including psychology. Generally speaking, this elite distinguished between "Gemeinschaft" and "Gesellschaft," that is, between community and society, and culture and civilization. It embraced the former and abhorred the latter. In particular, German psychologists like Wundt had nothing but contempt for the American version of psychology, which they regarded as materialistic, shallow, positivistic, and driven by egoistic utilitarianism rather than community integration and social sacrifice. Specifically, Wundt, the Wurzburg School, and the Gestalt psychologists regarded English

atomism as an expression of the failure of crass individualistic commercialization rather than the awareness, so fundamental to German psychology, of the fundamental importance of relations and holistic synthesis.

After some early exploration of the German scene, including time spent in Germany attempting to grasp the new psychology, American psychologists came more and more to adopt the credo of separation between psychology and philosophy. With the most notable exception of William James, the American claim was that psychology must separate itself completely from any philosophical assumptions and develop as a wholly autonomous discipline. Wundt, however, declared emphatically that “the most important problems in psychology were so closely connected with philosophical problems that a separation of the two would reduce the psychologist to the level of an artisan imprisoned by a covert and naïve metaphysics.” This admonition has taken on an insidious significance as the history of American psychology developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the influences of a growing industrial, capitalist society.

In the United States, psychology departments arose at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were inseparable from the development of a new technological division of labor whose primary concern was the manipulation of materials and the workforce. It must be remembered that this was a time of an enormous assimilation of immigrants who often brought with them a variety of radical social and political views considered detrimental to American stability and order. So, while there were merely four academic positions in psychology in all of Germany at the turn of the century, in the United States psychology departments expanded quickly to meet this perceived rapidly developing social need.

In the positivist tradition that has strongly influenced the construction of the American history of psychology, it has often been maintained that American universities developed experimental procedure, while the German university remained tied to traditional philosophical speculation, a distinction that would seem to commend the technological and scientific superiority of the United States. However, the actual situation was considerably more complicated: both countries developed experimental techniques but disagreed profoundly on the question of what constituted adequate experimentation. In Germany, experiments were conducted to explore the nature of consciousness; consequently, the method that was developed focused on the refinements and even standardization of introspection, states of consciousness. In the United States, on the other hand, the object of study was the behavior of animals, and the fundamental method that of empirical observation of behavioral change.

In the United States, the advocates of the burgeoning new psychology departments had to appeal to those who ran universities—the established power groups that dominated American industry, finance and communication. It was these forces that controlled the distribution of resources necessary for the establishment of psychology departments. They had little interest in issues related to philosophy and an intense concern with matters of social control. The character of knowledge they

wished to produce was technological knowledge—that is, knowledge which gave its possessor the power to dominate material nature and human society.

Therefore, in the United States, the new aspiring discipline of psychology had to justify its claims before the tribunal of the dominant practitioners of American business, or those who represented them. Such powerful figures were interested in social control and enhanced performance. This enterprise itself required the construction of a national system of secondary education to channel the massive migration and urbanization that was occurring and moving ever larger and more diverse populations into ever more intense and volatile population centers. Psychologists staked their professional existence and their claim for support on the assertion that they could provide the expertise that would make such technical facilitation possible.

The claim that the new experimental psychology could provide the foundation for the knowledge that was increasingly necessary to ground this rapidly emerging industrial society was precisely what American psychology asserted. It may well astonish us to realize the grandiosity of this psychological declaration, based as it was on practically no available evidence, but consider this passage from the work of one of America's best known early twentieth-century psychologists, Edward Lee Thorndike:

Psychology supplies or should supply the fundamental principles upon which sociology, history, anthropology, linguistics and the other sciences dealing with human thought and action should be based... The facts and laws of psychology....should provide the general basis for the interpretations and explanations of the great events studied by history, the complex activities of civilized society, the motive that control the actions of labor and capital... Theoretically, history, sociology, economics, linguistics and the other "humanities" or sciences of human affairs are all varieties of Psychology. (Note capitalization.)

This conviction was expressed by Thorndike at a time when psychology was actually struggling to predict the behavior of kittens in "puzzle boxes." Of course, this preposterous claim could only be asserted because of the shallowness of the psychological enterprise and the affinity between American individualism and the individualistic presuppositions of the psychological methodology being proposed.

The development of behaviorism in the United States rested upon the centrality of two concepts: first, the notion that human beings were intelligible wholly on the basis of the laws of the material sciences. So Karl Lashley asserted:

Let me cast off the lion's skin. My quarrel with behaviorism is not that it has gone too far, but that it has hesitated...that it has failed to develop its premises to their logical conclusion. To me the essence of behaviorism is the belief that the *study of man will reveal nothing except what is adequately describable in the concepts of mechanics and chemistry.* (Emphasis mine.)

Second, that the heart of scientific methodology was the possibility of "control." It might be thought that the essential element was the denial of consciousness, but this contention, while most often maintained by those who called

themselves “behaviorists,” was not universal. Lashley, for example, distinguished between “methodological” and “strict” behaviorism. The first variety acknowledged facts of consciousness but held that they were unsuitable for inclusion into any scientific discipline. The second version of behaviorism simply asserted that facts of consciousness do not exist. This ambiguity can be noted in the following claim of Watson:

Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the *prediction and control* of behavior. Introspection forms no essential part of its methods, nor is the scientific value of its data dependent on the readiness with which they lend themselves to interpretation in terms of consciousness. (Emphasis mine.)

And the deepest tendency upon which this denial of consciousness rested was the conviction that psychology would never become a science unless it successfully replicated the methodology of the “hard sciences.” But central to the methodology of these “hard sciences” was, in fact, the concept of “control,” which became the prevailing mantra of the new reductionist psychological approach and is found in all of the prominent behaviorists, including Hull, Tolman, and Skinner.

Thorndike, to whom we have already referred, stated vehemently: “There can be no moral warrant for studying man’s nature unless the study will enable us to control his acts.” Later in his life, Tolman, who also began as a dedicated opponent of consciousness, permitted the entrance into his theory of the concept of “cognitive maps,” a phrase that is surely unintelligible when stripped of the notion of consciousness.

As to who would exercise control and to what purpose, the theory was generally mute. But we can gain some sense of the prevailing threat involved in Watson’s statement that once the prevailing techniques were in place, the leaders of society would be able to “utilize our data in a practical way.” A portentous instance of Watson’s reflections is his comment that,

the behaviorist is primarily interested in the behavior of the whole man. From morning to night he watches him perform his daily round of duties. If it is bricklaying, he would like to measure the number of bricks he can lay under different conditions, how long he can go without dropping from fatigue....

I believe we can assume it was capital rather than labor that Watson envisioned exercising control over the process of work.

Behaviorism dominated American psychology from approximately 1915 to the late 1950s and still remains a significant influence. Although the view had its popularizers like Watson, it remained essentially an academic perspective given the impossibility of its being employed in ordinary life by ordinary people. It was not the esoteric writings of Hull, Kyo, and other behaviorists that popularized psychology but the rise of standardized testing and behavioral control of labor—necessities in a society intent on establishing the national system of uniform weights and measures, whether of material objects or human beings. The initial interest in testing can be

traced back to Galton in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The next significant contributor was Binet, whose focus was on the distinctions of individuals and the possibility of “special education.”

In the United States under the influence of Cattell and especially Terman, the fundamental questions revolved around the issue of the determinants of intelligence, which American psychologists tended to locate essentially in inheritance rather than in education. It is easy enough to construct the ideology that came to dominate the American psychological perspective in regard to testing: following in Galton’s spirit, the primary task was seen to be the control of superior and inferior individuals. “The future welfare of the country hinges, in no small degree, upon the right education of these superior children,” Terman announced. In regard to the “inferior,” Terman introduced the new schemes of eugenics that would become more popular after the war. Terman was clear and adamant:

It is safe to predict that in the near future intelligence tests will bring tens of thousands of these high-grade defectives (the feeble-minded) under the surveillance and protection of society. This will ultimately result in curtailing the reproduction of feeble-mindedness...

However, the primary situation that vaulted psychology into the mainstream of public awareness was the role of psychologists and their testing “acumen” during the First World War. Robert Yerkes could not have been clearer: “Today, American psychology is placing a highly trained and eager personnel at the service of our military organizations.” The alliance of psychology and the Army has, therefore, a long history, and obviously it is a history of service performed by psychology on behalf of the military. The particular “accomplishment” that Yerkes provided was the development of group intelligence tests, one for literate recruits and the other for those less intellectually capable.

I do not wish to enter into the details of these tests; the gravity of their consequences soon became obvious. After the war, Yerkes announced “the steady stream of requests from commercial concerns, educational institutions, and individuals for the use of the army methods of psychological examining or for the adaptation of such methods to special needs.” Testing, which implies standardized ranking, was becoming commonplace.

But the spirit of this new approach was soon to produce more virulent results. In 1924, Wiggam asserted: “We can have almost any kind of a race of human beings we want.” America produced a new “breed” of Galtonians, one not content with admonishing their countrymen of the evil of racial and moral adulteration and degeneration and merely relying on persuasion to encourage the most “fit” to breed with each other to improve the species, but, practical-minded as they were, devoted to selective immigration and eugenics.

Eugenics had begun in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Oneida Colony, but it was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a grant from the Carnegie Institution, that the biologist Charles Davenport was able to establish a laboratory

determined to “annihilate the hideous serpent of hopelessly vicious protoplasm,” that is, the “cacogenic people.” The practical solution to the existence of these feebleminded was compulsory sterilization, which by 1932 had been imposed on 12,000 Americans. In 1927, in *Buck vs. Bell*, the Supreme Court in a majority decision written by Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes upheld the practice: “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”

What is crucial is the realization of how early and deep the psychology profession’s embrace of “applied psychology” proved to be and how terrible its consequences. What is essential in Yerkes presidential address to the APA in 1918 was his proclamation that “The obvious and significant trend of our psychological military work is toward service....the demand for psychologists and psychological service promises, or threatens, to be overwhelmingly great.” Given later alliances between psychology and torture, this is an overwhelmingly portentous remark.

From the moment when the tendencies of positivism, behaviorism, instrumental reason, technical domination, the imposition of class determination, sexism, and racism recognized affinities in their positions, strong regressive currents came to form powerful tendencies in American psychology. The elaboration of these issues is too lengthy and complex for a short essay, so permit me a comment on one of the manifestations that emerged:

American psychology, in opposition to the introspective German version pioneered by Wundt, strove for “scientific” respectability and social recognition. It found its social support in that echelon of the class structure that dominated the rapidly expanding American industrial capitalist system. The “captains of industry” were interested in “control” of American life, and the new system of psychology, imitative of physics and chemistry, was committed to a methodology which embraced in its domain, the centrality of prediction and “control.” However one defines this affiliation, it was at the very least an embrace of kindred forces.

Every so-called scientific enterprise must make a fateful choice: either it establishes the priority of methodological rigor and so subordinates the object of its investigation to such status as can be carefully, quantitatively, and repetitively confirmed, or it embraces the life of its inquiry and replaces the mathematical certainty of its methodology with a procedure better fitted to the fluid, emerging, qualitative nature of its “object.” American psychology too often chose the former alternative.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Thorndike was studying the behavior of cats in “puzzle boxes,” as he called them, Wesley Mills observed—in a comment that unknowingly transcended the forewarning of his own time and set out so portentously toward our own—that Thorndike “placed cats in boxes only 20 x 12 x 12 inches, and then expected them to act naturally. As well enclose a living man in a coffin, lower him against his will, into the earth, and attempt to deduce normal psychology from his behavior.”

Too often—and once again—psychology chose the methodology of the coffin. It has the advantage of reducing the variables, clarifying the terms, and increasing the likelihood of control. It has also the “collateral damage” of mutilation, moral disfigurement, and death. Such is the practice of psychology when it forsakes the slow, patient, democratic creation of free self-transcendence for the violent precision of slaughter.