As I was preparing this talk, it occurred to me that I don't think I used the word "anarchism" anywhere in the two hundred-plus pages of American Methods. That's somewhat ironic, since I consider the analysis of the book to be anarchistic from top to bottom. So I'm going to speak for a few minutes today about what exactly anarchism contributes to our understanding of torture.

It will help if we pause to consider the standard analyses of torture. The crudest of these focus on individual personalities, whether it's the perverse soap opera of Lynndie England's love affair with Charles Graner, or Donald Rumsfeld's squabbles with his own generals, or George W. Bush's rather tenuous relationship with reality. At the next level of analysis, we get discussions of particular instruments, like tasers, or techniques, like water-boarding. After that, we see discussion of more institutional aspects, such as policies or training. And at the most abstract, there is the tension between executive power and the rule of law.

Now all of that's worth looking at, and some really remarkable work has been done on some of those questions. But what's missing, from all these discussions, is the role of the state as such.

That's rather surprising, and it shouldn't just surprise anarchists. The Absolutist philosopher Thomas Hobbes, for example, would have likely been surprised at the limited attention the state receives, since he saw force as the defining characteristic of the state and the law merely as the codification of the sovereign's will. Even by Max Weber's definition - the basic definition accepted by most social scientists - states monopolize force. One would think, then, that state power is precisely the issue.

So, why is the state missing? There are two main reasons. The first is the broad acceptance of liberal assumptions about government, namely that it is inevitable, permanent, and legitimate. The state is taken for granted to the point of being forgotten. It's just assumed, and thereby obscured. It's everywhere, and therefore it gets overlooked.

The second reason concerns our historical amnesia and our post-9/11 tunnel vision. We've largely forgotten the history of torture before September 11, 2001. Because we're encouraged to think of torture as special to our current circumstances, and especially to the War on Terror, it becomes hard to recognize the continuities in its use, both from earlier periods of time, and as these continuities exist between the use of torture abroad and the practices of police and prisons domestically. As a result, we misunderstand the role of the institutions involved - prisons, police, the military.

There are real consequences to these sorts of mistakes. Because torture is largely viewed as a unique feature of the Bush administration, or of the War on Terror, the proposed solutions involve either a change of leadership or a return to the rule of law. The Democrats, of course, emphasize leadership. Human rights organizations and lawyers focus on the rule of law. But the truth is that neither is likely to be enough.

Which brings us to anarchism. Anarchism understands that torture is not simply a matter of bad people doing bad things. It's a function of power and the institutions that wield it, especially the
state. Because anarchism puts the focus back on the state, it can account for the historical continuity of torture practices, and for the similarity of abuses domestically and abroad. So while liberals and genuine conservatives are surprised and appalled by the lawlessness of Guantanamo, anarchists see it as exemplifying state power. It's exactly the sort of thing that we would expect. Hence we won't look for salvation from the Democrats, or the courts, or the UN. To stop torture we have to break down the institutions responsible for it. We have to do away with the police, the prisons, the military, the spy agencies - in short, with the whole coercive apparatus of government.

By putting the focus back on the state, anarchism makes torture explicable, and it offers a genuine path toward its elimination rather that wishful thinking about human rights and empty promises concerning the rule of law. It also understands the necessity of struggle. Because it is the nature of power to expand, we can never settle for a barely-tolerable status quo. The choice is not between a better future, or more of the same. Without resistance, things inevitably get worse.

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