

"Evidence, exposures, and acknowledgements in the war on terror"

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How torture became speakable

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On March 25, 2019, Dr. Lisa Stampnitzky, from the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield, presented a portion of her research, entitled "Evidence, exposures, and acknowledgements in the war on terror," which focused on how and why torture came to be openly discussed in the years following the 9/11 attacks in 2001. She had been invited by the School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies, through the efforts of doctoral candidate Gilbert Mclaughlin, and Prof. Meg Stalcup, director of the Multimedia Anthropology Collaboratory (CAM/MAC).

In her presentation, Stampnitzky explored a public conversation in which torture shifted from being unspeakable – that is to say, not acknowledged as something the U.S. could ever do because it is not aligned with being a modern democratic and liberal state – to a topic of discussion used to political ends.

Methodologically, Stampnitzky reconstructed emerging narratives and discourses surrounding torture through an excavation of news articles and op-eds, with a focus on what people knew and said *at the time*. In so doing, she was able to see how the debate shifted and narratives were re-written. It has become conventional wisdom that leaked photos of torture in Abu Ghraib, in April 2004, caused a scandal that catalyzed a debate about torture and when it might be justified in the United States. However, Stampnitzky found that this discussion began with the events of 9/11.

Essentially, the broader public discussion of torture in and after 2001 consisted of two parallel debates. The first was a line of questioning about whether torture could ever be ethical. This assumed that torture was not taking place. It was often presented as the ticking time bomb scenario: a terrorist has planted a bomb that will go off in one hour. Presupposing that torture is an effective method of finding out where it is, this hypothetical situation was used to debate

whether or not it could ever be justified to save the lives of millions of people. This was paralleled by scattered acknowledgements that certain interrogation tactics and forms of coercion were being used, but maintained a level of ambiguity and an assurance that the publicly imagined notion of ‘torture’ was not taking place. Some of the methods that were used included sleep deprivation and methods widely considered psychological torture, but framed as efficient and necessary forms of interrogation. A key distinction made between these forms was that of civility. The techniques of coercion that were being used by Americans were described as professional, effective, safe, and scientific. On the other hand, physical torture and the trope of the rubber hose were seen as the opposite – uncivil, violent, and irrational.

While Stampnitzky demonstrated that the release of the Abu Ghraib photos in 2004 did not spark the debate on torture in the United States, it did mark a major “moment of exposure,” highlighting the tactics being used by the American government and military. The concrete images of torture shown in the photos, including people smiling alongside tortured bodies, revealed physical evidence that contested previous government claims and was much more difficult for officials to deny. The photos exposed a “toxic boasting” and public marking of these so-called civil techniques, which then disrupted the abstract vision of rational forms of torture. The debate once again shifted. Rather than denouncing torture itself, people began to criticize the sadistic ways in which the torture was presented, particularly the idea of people having fun while taking part in these acts, which was seen as a violation of basic standards of human decency and American values.

Stampnitzky’s lecture brought up broader questions such as, what makes human rights violations known and what does it mean for something to be known publicly or privately? During the question period, Stampnitzky discussed how themes of speakability, exposure, and private and public knowledge are relevant to contemporary issues, including the recent release of the Mueller report in the United States, which is “a moment of exposure of what we already know.” Other interesting points included how popular culture and torture speakability shaped each other (i.e. the TV show “24” using certain torture techniques that were later revealed to have influenced the American officials conducting torture) and how the idea of the U.S. as a model for human rights treatment had been eclipsed by a conflicting image of the U.S. as ‘tough’ vs. ‘not tough enough’ that may have contributed to the 2016 election of Donald Trump.