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Learning through - or about - torture



Unless you are a bloodthirsty maniac, you probably have never indulged in any physical torture of another human being. Or have you?

Obviously, if you were a heretic in more puritanical times, public executions, involving the slashing of your belly, disembowelling you and having your intestines burnt before you before your own eyes was very popular and drew audiences. But we have moved on now, have we not?

The belt, or as it was known in Scotland, the "tawse" was the instrument of threat and punishment in Scotland's schools when I was a pupil.

From the age of six, teachers felt the need to thrash education into the callous youths if they misbehaved, which usually meant "talking in class", therefore not paying attention to the teacher who was the dispensary of all wisdom, never to be ignored.

Failing to do your homework also merited this kind of punishment. They were the Calvinist version of venal sins.

I remember Miss Mac, in her early 20s, a 1960's bombshell with her mini skirts and Mary Quant bob, having no compunction in thrashing any pupil who displeased her.

Her motive, as I recall, was "talking in class" and therefore NOT PAYING ATTENTION. We were six years old.

I remember the hard boys, who displayed their injuries in the playground with feigned pride, like stigmata

Yet more terrifying was the prospect of reaching the age of 7, fated to face the strictures of Miss X.. She loved her "curly tawse" - a thick brown belt with a snake-like

forked tongue specifically designed to inflict more pain, upon which she actually sat. And she used it with abandon.

For once, females had the upper hand, because most of the thrashers - generally - baulked at hurting girls. I remember the hard boys, who displayed their injuries in the playground with feigned pride, like stigmata.

In fact, a large part of this peculiar torture was the shame associated with it. The punishment was almost theatrical: carried out in public, in front of the rest of the class, presumably pour décourager les autres.

Regardless of the pain, young pupils flushed with embarrassment and fear that their parents would find out and admonish them further.

The problem was, oddly, that she didn't need to thrash education into children. I still recall a sunny Indian summer's day when she lowered the blinds to avoid the glare, and crisply and succinctly taught us the difference between a subject, object and a verb, which I never forgot. She didn't need to teach by terrorism; she knew how to educate.

This practice never stopped me from talking as I am a garrulous type, encouraged to question and discuss received wisdom.

But I wonder how it affected certain of my schoolmates who were more restrained and obedient.

I've come across these nervous people throughout my life. Loath to participate in any form of discussion and debate; considering their opinions worthless; terrified of having to defend what might be a heretical point of view. Was it the threat of violence and harm that caused this?

Finally, in 1986, the European Court of Human Rights banned the practice in European state

schools, and a ban in private schools - where caning was the preferred method - followed a few years later.

But it is still legal and is practised in certain US states, South Africa, Sudan, Zambia and North Korea.

There are alarming reports of physical violence against teachers from pupils

Of course the pendulum has swung significantly to flip the balance: now no teacher would dare inflict physical punishment on any pupil.

On the contrary, there are alarming reports of physical violence against teachers from pupils. In extreme cases, teachers have been stabbed or even shot by a disaffected student.

You grow up, you acquire worldly experience and learn that there are worse forms of torture than curly tawse.

We could only imagine had what happened in the Lubliyanka (KGB HQ in Moscow) or to dissidents in the USSR's satellite states during the Cold War; it didn't sound like fun.

But It was the Balkan Wars in the 1990's when we started to witness atrocities on TV - genocide, unimaginable human rights violations, sexual violence, 50 years after the "Never Again" litany of World War II.

This was followed by the the Iraq war, by which time anyone could watch what was happening if they had an internet connection.

Horrifying footage of the worst torture possible, followed shortly by the terrifying anarchy in Syria for which no politician or nation has paid.

On the contrary, the Americans were found to

have attempted to match like with like: the waterboarding technique.

Waterboarding - a pointless procedure?

You're drowning, not waving: you'll say anything to make the torture stop. The US still never elicited any information to root out the so-called WMD.

Former Vice President Dick Cheney claimed that such "enhanced interrogation techniques" contributed to the US troops' pinpointing the location of Osama bin Laden, but his claims were subsequently refuted by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

It's therefore a counter-productive strategy which is morally repugnant and should not be state-sponsored by the leader of the free world?

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But if that is the case, and torture is indeed counter-productive, why does it persist? And why do people pay lip service to its moral repugnance and lack of effectiveness, yet carry on doing it?

It's quite obvious that a long-lived brutal dictator will brutalise their own population. Maybe this is why some countries are able to comply with the rejection of torture when so many don't?

Does the US justify it - it's never been a voting issue - because of a 9/11 type of atrocity and

the understandably outraged population turns
a blind eye to it?

I realise I've asked more questions than I have
answered. It is not the kind of question we
can experiment on in a scientific laboratory.

We appear to be fated to treat torture as a fact
of life to which some some individuals appear
to have a propensity.