

Translations of Security

A Framework for the Study of
Unwanted Futures

Trine Villumsen Berling

Ulrik Pram Gad

Karen Lund Petersen and

Ole Wæver



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for progress. Whether this urge for improvement, learning or control, creates new or different cultures is a matter of analytical perspective. Maja Zehfuss' tale (discussed in chapter 3) exemplifies this: The whole basis for having the US Army employ anthropologists in Afghanistan is an idea that "we" can actually understand the Other (provided that we are trained adequately). Likewise, in Jonathan Austin's tale (Box 4.1) of how torture was translated as part of the Global War on Terror, US officials believed that they could acquire culturally specific knowledge from inviting interrogators from Middle East countries to explain or show how they managed the unwanted future embodied in suspected terrorists of that cultural background.

Box 4.1 Hot Tea with Sugar and the Translation(s) of Torture

Jonathan L. Austin

In January 2002, the United States asked itself whether it should continue letting detainees at Guantanamo Bay "think they are being taken to shot" or, alternatively, whether they should get them some "hot tea with sugar." This question, of whether to be benign or brutal, was resolved with a call to acquire "expert[s] in their culture to help us with issues such as this."¹ While the names of the experts who eventually answered this call are unknown, their nationalities are: Egyptians, Jordanians, Syrians, Libyans, and other regional neighbours (Open Society Foundation, 2013). Security agencies from these states offered their staff to assist US, British, and other forces in the "interrogation" of prisoners. As is well known, then, the United States ultimately chose to import a global expertise in brutality. The logic underlying this decision revolved around the claim that the *present bad* of torture should be embraced in order to pre-empt an unwanted *future* (a "ticking [terrorist] time bomb"). Against this, critics immediately countered, torture would deleteriously introduce an additional consequence [?!] to that causal chain: the *present bad*, nay evil of torture, intended to prevent an unwanted *future*, would also instantiate a *worse-unwanted future* by "changing us" or "our" democratic constitution (For notable versions of the argument and the critique, in dialectical form, see Dershowitz (2002) and Scarry (2004)). What this changing-of-"us" refers to, *concretely*, has never quite been specified, however. Here, I suggest it relates to the intimate entanglement of different security cultures or cosmologies in the joint enaction of violence and, as the old saying goes, the betrayals that the translations in practices, hierarchies, and ontologies these entanglements ultimately provoked.

To return to Guantanamo Bay, we can see the brutality of those translations in the testimony of Mohamedou Ould Slahi, one of the so-called “high-value” detainees held there, and his following autoethnographic record of a conversation between American, Jordanian, and Egyptian torturers:

“We appreciate everybody who works with us, thanks gentlemen,” said [the US interrogator].

“We happy for zat. Maybe we take him to Egypt, he say everything,” said an Arab guy whose voice I’d never heard, with a thick Egyptian accent. (...)

“Somebody like this coward, it takes us only one hour in Jordan until he spits everything,” said the Jordanian [interrogator].

While competing over the relative efficacy of their violence work, this trio of “interrogators” was inflicting a method of torture that Slahi describes as “ice cubes and smashing” upon his body (Slahi 2013). This particular practice of pain was introduced to Guantanamo Bay by these two external security cultures, before later being rearticulated in Iraq and elsewhere by US Special Forces. Indeed, US Department of Defense inquiries into the torture techniques used in Abu Ghraib later described how they had “migrated” from Guantanamo. This trade and transfer of torture practices moves us to the first element translated by these intercultural relations: the morphologies of practices themselves. Practices are not simply collected “as is” but are, rather, fused, bonded, and recombined so as to translate repertoires of action significantly. Thus, an earlier Cold War shift in interrogation practices towards “clean” psychological techniques – inspired by scientific experimentation and the mimicking of Soviet practices – shifted again post-9/11 by combining psychological and physical coercion: a clean *and* brutal torture in which the ice of this “ice cubes and smashing” erased “sovereign” signs of pain. For a discussion of the Cold War-era evolutions, see Rejali (2007).

These morphological translations in torture practices were mediated through human bodies like Slahi’s and he himself describes these experiences of spatial multiplicity – in which the violences of multiple security cultures were enmeshed and enacted in the same space – as just another abduction inside the abduction of his rendition (Slahi 2013). The violence unleashed at Guantanamo, and elsewhere, related thus to the specific expertise imported into this field of action and not simply any aberrant Schmittian exception. Indeed, once torture became, in the words of the Open Society Foundation, *globalised* in this way at least two further forms of translation were set in motion: of the hierarchies of world politics and of the ontologies of actors. To turn to hierarchies, material assistance in the

“detainee programme” was not provided in subservient terms. Jordan, Egypt, and other states were not mere clients. They could make demands, and they did. To show this, we can turn to another disappeared detainee, Sami al-Saadi. Al-Saadi was a Libyan dissident living in exile until, in February 2004, he was arrested in China, transferred to Hong Kong, and then “rendered” by the CIA and MI6 to Tripoli, where he was placed in the custody of the Libyan state, which imprisoned, tortured, and sentenced him to death (Human Rights Watch 2012). Importantly, the CIA and MI6 were unconcerned with Al-Saadi and he was abducted solely at the whim of the Libyan authorities in return for intelligence cooperation. Indeed, there are many other instances in which authoritarian states demanded and received assistance from democratic states in such a way as to invert the traditional view of counter-terrorist “cooperation” as hierarchically directed by a metropolitan centre (or “Empire”) of world political violence (*ibid.*).

To move finally to ontologies, however, upon Al-Saadi’s release and the discovery of documents in post-Gaddafi Libya detailing MI6 involvement in his torture he began legal proceedings against the British government. The British refused, on national security grounds, however, to try his case openly and instantiated, instead, a trial in the secret court system it had established soon after 9/11. In response, Al-Saadi gave up his quest for justice with the words that, “I went through a secret trial once before, in Gaddafi’s Libya. In many ways, it was as bad as the torture.” Secret courts, a post-9/11 adoption of authoritarian practices, were necessitated to mask complicity in torture, just as they are in classically understood autocratic or despotic states. This is what I mean by the translation of ontologies: the inertia produced by the entangling of an actor in a hybrid assemblage that necessitates substantial changes in its identity. This ontological translation can be traced back to the enmeshing of security cultures in the same space of violence at Guantanamo Bay, to the consequent translation of the morphologies of torture practices, and the resultant reassembling of the hierarchies of world politics. It is here then that the concrete meaning behind the injunction that torture “changes us” can be located and, moreover, where we also find the genesis of emerging homologies or “unforeseen convergences” between democratic and autocratic states (Agamben 1998: 13). Indeed, to end back with Slahi in Cuba, he also described the moment at which his body was beaten there as marking a “thick line between my past and my future.” It was then that he felt his self being “broken” but it was also, perhaps, one forgotten moment in which contingencies between being benign and being brutal were definitively translated into the betrayals of that forewarned *worse-unwanted future*. And it is thus that another of Slahi’s remarks hints, finally, at how the

consequences of these painful translations for own body echoed back on his assailants: “It is not me anymore, and I will never be the same as before” (Slahi 2013).

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In both Zehfuss’ and Austin’s tale, the motivation for understanding the cultural Other was ultimately to better fight the enemy who is hiding among the cultural Other; perhaps even incarnating a particularly threatening version of the Other culture. This is how the motivation for a “cultural translation” looks from a national security perspective. A supplemental motivation for the very same engagement may be found when looking at these particular cases from the perspective of a performance-oriented bureaucratic organisation. Particularly Austin’s tale lays out how the selection of knowledge and the learning of technologies is done in order to appear *useful* from one organisational point of view (Wigen 2018: 3), even if this might compromise the values signifying the larger identity of which the organisation is also a part. What seems useful within one organisational rationality (a bureaucratic one) might not be so in the context of another (broader cultural identity). For cultures, hence, the selection of knowledge across cultural boundaries is a negotiation at many levels.