Paradoxes of Tyranny and Death
Judging Saddam Hussein and La Santa Muerte

Introduction

Following the stealthy formal transfer of power by the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq in June 2004, the world has been once again faced with Saddam Hussein -- and his trial by an Iraqi judiciary under US supervision. Many comment on whether his trial will be fair, and seen to be fair. For the editor of The Observer (4 July 2004): "Will the former dictator be mythologised as a hero or reviled as a tyrant he was? That will depend, not on the evidence, nor on his ugly record, but on whether his trial is seen to be fair."

In the same paper, Mary Riddell (Justice on trial; in a courtroom in Baghdad, there are two defendants -- Saddam and the occupying forces) points out with regard to Saddam Hussein:

> Now, in his disgrace, he retains one hope of potency. The power of pity is available even to monsters, if they are seen to be suitably ill-treated by their captors. Saddam clanking in chains is a more persuasive figure, for all his viciousness, than a tyrant offered the protective panoply of the law. But what exactly is that?...Violence is rarely assuaged by more of the same...But if the former occupiers censor and interfere, the process could instead symbolise the collapse of justice that disfigures citizens' lives in this and all other centuries.

Dignity vs Indignity

Much fiction, and its cinematic adaptation, cultivates the dignity of the final encounter between arch rivals embodying "good" and "evil". However, it is then a measure of the greatness of the hero -- and of the values that he or she represents -- that the opponent be held in dignity, however he or she is to be judged. It is the embodiment of the "good" that then stays the hand of the lynch mob -- and the vengeful attentions of over-enthusiastic subordinates.

Whether during military conflict, or in the clashes between urban gangs, many report on how impressive may be the dignity of the realities of such a final encounter. This was especially true of incidents in the past World Wars. It would appear that in that dramatic moment there is a special kind of exchange. The victor receives honour to the extent that honour is offered to the loser -- whether or not it is merited. The courtesies accorded to the loser are a measure of the qualities of the victor. There have been conflicts, such as between India and Pakistan, where the key generals have significant respect for each other -- in addition to having been trained at the same military academy (Sandhurst).

Indignities inflicted upon the embodiment of "evil" are indications of the degree to which those claiming to embody the "good" themselves partake of that "evil". This exchange is evident in sport. Triumphalism on the part of the victors, publicly disparaging the losers, at some stage reaches a point where the quality of the victory is undermined, whatever its technical merits according to the rules. Pyrrhic
It is extremely unfortunate that there are no clear procedures for handling the deadly enemies of civilized society in the person of their symbolic leaders. In the case of Saddam Hussein, the world can only imagine that ignorant soldiers subjected him to indignities and violence with the tacit approval of their superiors. Assertions to the contrary would be challenged by the pattern of violence publicized with respect to treatment of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib. Whether or not Saddam Hussein was subjected to such indignities is not the issue. Rather it is the fact that the values supposedly embodied by the "good" in defence of their civilization are not exemplified by the stealthy interaction between the Coalition of the Willing and their prime target. Indeed there is a degree to which the publicity focus given to his removal from his hiding place, and the indignities of his subsequent inspection of his hair for louse, exemplify, to a far greater degree, the impoverished and tainted values of the victors.

The problematic aspects of his trial under US supervision, whilst remaining in US custody, are already arousing critical comment -- even from those Iraqis that have every personal reason to abhor him. They too can be in no doubt of his treatment away from public eyes. The point they make is that he is an Iraqi, however "evil", and there is a point at which indignities in his treatment as an Iraqi are held to be of greater significance than as a tyrant.

The challenge for the future is evident in the possible treatment of Osama bin Laden -- when finally captured. Will he too be subject to the torture prescribed by US military intelligence and effectively approved by the President of the USA? Should he be dragged through the streets in chains? How might Hitler have been brought to trial? Was the treatment of Adolf Eichmann to the honour of those who finally placed him on trial? What of the trial of Slobodan Milosevic in The Hague?

The degree of culture and civilization is surely most evident from the treatment accorded not to one's friends and allies, but rather that accorded to one's deadliest enemies -- when they are finally in one's power. [more | more | more | more | more]

**Engagement of observers**

Conflicts, such as Kosovo and Iraq, compete with fictionalized conflicts on television. In fact the fictionalized versions may evoke more insight than do real encounters reported by the media. Both constitute forms of psychodrama through which individuals and groups achieve a catharsis necessary to life in modern society.

For the engaged observer, whether of a fictional encounter with "evil" or a real one, the question is to what degree of indignity am I willing to subscribe -- especially if it is done in my name (see Stanley Milgram. *Obedience to Authority*, 1983). Do I really want the person beaten "within an inch of his life" -- an "eye for an eye"? How readily could I be drawn into a Lynch mob rationale? Would I really want to engage in the punishment, or execution, myself -- even if the other had been responsible for the death of my loved one under unmentionable circumstances? What of Rudy Giuliani's statement, as mayor of New York, that he personally wanted to "pull the switch" on Osama bin Laden?

There is indeed a tendency for those threatened to identify to some degree with those that threaten them. The phenomenon is termed the **Stockholm Syndrome** -- recognized in numerous hostage situations in which, although the captives themselves are not able to explain it, they display a strange association with their captors, identifying with them while fearing those who seek to end their captivity. Initially this is a defensive mechanism, based on the (often unconscious) idea that the captor will not hurt the captive if he is cooperative and even positively supportive. Long term captivity builds even stronger attachment to the captor as he becomes known as a human being with his own problems and aspirations. Particularly in political or ideological situations, longer captivity also allows the captive to become familiar with the captor's point of view and the history of his grievances against authority. He may come to believe that the captor's position is just. The captive seeks to distance himself emotionally from the situation by denial that it is actually taking place. Depending on his degree of identification with the captor he may deny that the captor is at fault, holding that the would-be rescuers and their insistence on punishing the captor are ready to blame for his situation. [more]

The question is whether the action of terrorists in society triggers the Stockholm Syndrome on the part of members of the population. For although they are not literally "captive" of the terrorists, they are effectively caught up in the collective fear engendered by terrorists. Ironically, it is the counterterrorist security measures (catalyzed by movie plots they may well have sponsored) that may most effectively make "captive" of the population -- thus enhancing emergence of the Stockholm Syndrome.

**Appropriate sentencing**

Many who have had reason to seek the death penalty as the outcome of a trial, remain dissatisfied with the result. Some find the penalty "too easy" -- the person is held to have "got off lightly".

It is such sentiments that have triggered much crueler penalties -- for which the Northern Alliance warlord ally of the US in Afghanistan, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, acquired renown by his crushing of Taliban prisoners under tank treads. Religious conflicts have justified impaling or crucifixion.

What is the most appropriate punishment for someone who has engaged in heinous acts?

Peter Beaumont (*Saddam paradox divides Iraqis. The Observer*, 4 July 2004) reports on the ambiguities of appropriate judgement. He asks:

> But why is it that so many Iraqis, even those who suffered most seriously at his hands, remain so ambivalent about the process against Saddam, whom they nicknamed The Destroyer?
Noting that one declared: "He is an Iraqi but it is God who should punish him", Beaumont cites the views of a former bodyguard of Saddam who had been imprisoned and badly tortured by him:

I would like to be the judge...I would tell him that history has no mercy on those who betray history. Then I would look at him and be silent, and my silence would be the loudest scream in the world.

Is the execution of Adolf Eichmann, or those judged to be tyrants, not an easy way out? A way of apparently "drawing a line" under an event that continues to characterize "human nature" -- when perhaps the implication of humans in the event should not be simplified by such a tidy solution.

How would one wish to be judged by others who find one's acts heinous and abhorrent according to their standards? There are many fundamentalists, of all persuasions, capable of such judgements. How would Henry Kissinger expect to be judged by his detractors in Chile who suffered as a result of US support for the revolution against Allende on 11 September 1973 -- the "day democracy died in Chile" according to the BBC? [more]. On this theme, Peter Hitchens (Mail on Sunday, 4 July 2004) argues that:

There is another danger here for Anthony Blair, who is so keen on the trial of the Baghdad tyrant. It is not wholly impossible that he may one day find himself in some international dock... There are plenty of people in Europe and the Middle East who view Mr Blair as a transgressor for his involvement in the bombing of Iraq. They cannot get at Mr Bush because America is careful to make sure it is not subject to international courts. But Britain is, and Mr Blair's retirement could yet be spent in a courtroom.

Shadow and enantiodromia

The media treatment of figureheads like Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, with the deliberate encouragement of government news management and PsyOps, effectively stage manages a powerful psychodrama by which many are entrained [more]. Whilst at one level it engenders fear (consistent with views of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky. Manufacturing Consent, 1988) that is fruitfully supportive of repressive legislation, at another level such figureheads create a continuing encounter with the "other" in psychoanalytic terms. They become an embodiment of the personal shadow with which people may not normally have to deal so specifically -- or with so much consensual reinforcement. This may then be considered as a collective shadow.

Fundamentalism, with its ready condemnation of the "other" -- the shadow -- as "evil", is vulnerable to a process known as enantiodromia (see Paul Johnson. Violence Shadows Reverence, 1995; Jessica Benjamin. Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis, 1998). This is the emergence of the unconscious opposite when such an extreme, one-sided tendency dominates conscious life. It is the Heraclitean process by which something becomes its opposite, and the subsequent interaction of the two: applied especially to the adoption by an individual (or by a community) of a view opposite to that held at an earlier stage. Enantiodromia is typically experienced in conjunction with symptoms associated with acute neurosis. This explains why many of the most hardcore submissives and masochists usually carry great responsibility and power in their everyday life and careers. Masochism is their counterbalance that prevents enantiodromia and the development of neuroses.[more]. A the collective level, any "clash of civilizations" is more usefully seen as part of an enantiodromic process between cultures -- as explored by William Irwin Thompson (The Four Cultural Ecologies of the West).

It could well be the case that the drive of the western Coalition of the Willing, to reshape the Middle East -- and the Arab world -- in its own image, will trigger a form of enantiodromia. This is already evident in the ambiguity experienced by many who have suffered most from Saddam Hussein, and have most reason to detest him, but have been confronted by the heavy handedness of their occupiers.

It is therefore ironic that, in the same paper reporting on attitudes to Saddam Hussein, should be a report by Jo Tuckman (Downtrodden join the cult of Saint Death, the 'miracle worker' of Mexico's slums. The Observer, 4 July 2004). This deals with the appeal in Mexico's jails and urban slums of La Santa Muerte (Saint Death, La Santisima Muerte, Sacred Death) -- whose petitioners are prostitutes, drug dealers and murderers, as well as multitudes of ordinary housewives, taxi drivers and street vendors hoping to cure a sick child or pay the rent or simply make it through another day without getting robbed or kidnapped or shot. (see Homero Aridjis. La Santa Muerte) [more | more]. Tuckman notes: "Anthropologists date the origins of the cult to the Spanish conquest that brought Christianity in contact with the Aztec death worship. Church repression kept the tradition dormant for centuries until it resurfaced in poor urban areas."

Aside from the acceptance of death by suicide bombers and their supporters, there are a number of points of comparison with the Coalition's vengeful Christian mission in Iraq and the curious rejection by Iraqis of the western understanding of democracy and liberation -- despite the hopelessness of their condition. Curious too that the most marginalized should take such a proactive attitude towards death, whilst those strongest in their convictions of the merits of their civilization should be so traumatized by it.

References

Anthony Judge:

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- Globalization of Death: a checklist. 2003 [text]
- Global Strategic Implications of the Unsaid: from myth-making towards a wisdom society. 2003 [text]
- Terminal Empowerment: socio-political implications of radical mutual assistance amongst the terminally ill. 2003 [text]