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Anonymous

Post: 08 Jan 2007 21:43  Post subject: January 2007: From Artaxerxes to Abu Ghraib


Coming soon is the invited commentary from Amy Kaplan. To leave your own response to Bruce Lincoln's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a reply, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

Anonymous

Post: 15 Jan 2007 18:02  Post subject: Amy Kaplan's response to Bruce Lincoln

There was something uncanny about watching the video of the hanging of Saddam Hussein after reading Bruce Lincoln’s fascinating piece about spectacles of imperial violence. The hanging was neither officially staged by the U.S., as was the toppling of Saddam’s statue, nor was it an “offstage” event performed by underlings, like the torture at Abu Ghraib. But it shared important elements of both.

Although the Bush administration tried to distance itself from the hanging in deference to Iraqi “sovereignty,” that very disavowal of responsibility contributed to the spectacle of imperial violence as illuminated by Lincoln’s discussion of the torture and execution of Mithridates. Lincoln argues that according to an empire that represents itself as the embodiment of moral goodness against absolute evil and the guardian of “the truth” against “the lie,” it is not possible to
degrade enemies, because they are inherently degraded themselves. Any torture or abuse inflicted against them only confirms this essential identity of the enemy and thus necessity of the imperial rule.

In many ways Saddam's execution was portrayed in the U.S. press as an extension of his own brutality rising from the dead to devour him, the moral stink of his regime, like the bodily rot of Mithridates, consuming him. He was hanged in one of his own filthy execution chambers, taunted by representatives of people he had tortured and executed. This circularity has appeared to most of the world, however, as vengeance, rather than a display of the moral superiority of the democratic system the U.S. was supposedly bringing to Iraq, and President Bush has been held as responsible, if not more so, than Prime Minister Maliki.

Despite the fact that the US held Saddam Hussein as prisoner in the Green Zone, and readily transported him to his execution by helicopter, the U.S. represented itself as out of control of the staging. In fact, the administration claimed to be working behind the scenes to restrain the vengeful qualities of the Iraqi government, to have them extend the appeals process, and respect the timing of the Sunni celebration of the religious holiday. In this execution the U.S. neither fully embraced nor condemned, it thus demonstrated to itself the western values of justice and tolerance that have been used to justify its invasion and violent occupation of Iraq. The U.S. “failure” to restrain the Iraqis served as a spectacle of empire in its own right; for not only Saddam Hussein, the targeted “evil doer,” but the Iraqi government and by extension all Iraqis appeared to act out for the world their own barbaric and insufficiently modern identity, enacting a “tribal revenge ritual” as Thomas Friedman called it, or acting as “lesser breeds without the law” as Kipling would have called it.

It's worth quoting Friedman about the degraded nature of the Iraqis, “who have rarely surprised us with gestures of reconciliation -- only with new ways to kill each other.” Friedman contrasts the barbarity of Saddam's execution to dignified funeral of Gerald Ford, “I have to admit I got a lump in my throat watching that scene and listening to that stirring melody. Saddam's execution was a snapshot of a country divided. Gerald Ford’s funeral was a snapshot of a country united -- political supporters and opponents alike paying tribute to a president, who was surrounded by an honor guard representing every color of the American rainbow and whose place in history was secured by an act of pardon and national healing. How fortunate to live in a country where this is the political norm, built up over generations.”

Although Freidman does gently slap U.S. wrists for the lack of security in Iraq, he concludes that “The raw tribal theatrics of Saddam's hanging highlight just how few of these values Iraq has imported” (“A Hanging and a Funeral” [i]NYT[/i], January 3, 2007). How are a devastating military invasion and violent occupation construed as the Iraqi failure to “import” democratic values? Lincoln’s analysis helps us
see the projection of agency onto those subjected to imperial power and the disavowal of acts of violence by the imperialists themselves.

Thus this spectacle worked in similar ways to that of Lincoln’s analysis of Abu Ghraib. In both cases the “scandal” seemed to stem not from the violent acts of torture and capital punishment, but from the fact that these acts were caught on unofficial media and circulated around the world. (A key historical difference between the two empires). The investigations on the part of both the American and Iraqi governments were first conducted against the “leaks.” But this unofficial circulation seemed to afford more imperial pleasure; it made imperial America (but not all Americans) feel good about the story empire tells about itself: that it is a force for benevolence in the world.

As Lincoln writes, “moral depravity and moral confidence are dialectically related.” The scandal of Abu Ghraib reinforced in the American press and political pronouncements the discourse of exceptionalism, the “few bad apples” story. “The values of this country are such that torture is not a part of our soul and our being,” said Bush; rather it stems from the essential depravity of Iraqi bodies, “which were always already degraded,” as Lincoln claims, and therefore deserved the treatment they received. These innocent, young, unsupervised Americans seemed themselves drawn into a “heart of darkness,” a jungle of depravity, which they had no hand in creating, nor did their superiors, their military culture, or the prison system many of them worked for at home.

As added evidence for Lincoln’s analysis, many of those horrified by the photographs from Abu Ghraib (including Seymour Hirsch) repeated the claim that the sexual abuse was especially humiliating to Muslim men because of their culture. But what can this possibly explain? Doesn’t this gesture of “cultural understanding” implicitly render part of the problem that Arabs are not advanced enough members of a modern world that accepts nudity and homosexuality. Who in the world, of any gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or religion, would not be terrorized and humiliated by the same treatment?

I’d like to conclude with two questions about the role of the spectacle of imperial violence (and I found spectacle a more useful term than pornography) in both the Persian Empire and the U.S. Empire today. Is the empire always in control of how the spectacles are received or are they open to interpretation by multiple audiences depending on their global and political locations? Are these spectacles triumphal celebrations of power over the world or also in their excess, do they express haunting anxieties about the vulnerability and limits of empire, as J. M. Coetzee writes in [i]Waiting for the Barbarians[/i]: “One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.” This preoccupation is fueled in part by those submerged historical analogies which Lincoln has brought to our awareness, which show that empires never live forever.
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Professor Kaplan has recently written on 9/11 and the language and culture of empire today, including “Where is Guantánamo?” in [i]Legal Borderlands: Law and the Construction of American Borders, American Quarterly[/i] (special issue) 57.3 (September 2005): pp. 831-858.