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# Governing Uncertainty in the Secular Age: Rationalities of Violence, Theodicy, and Torture

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## Abstract

This article explores the problem of governing uncertainty in the secular age by focusing on the theological notion of theodicy as the underlying rationale for the use of torture in the so-called 'war on terror'. The problem of uncertainty acquires new salience with God's departure from the world as human beings can no longer explain tragic events as part of a transcendent order and must find immanent causes for the 'evils' that surround them. Taking cue from Max Weber, I discuss how the problem of theodicy – how to reconcile the existence of God with the presence of evil in the world – does not disappear in the secular age, but is mobilised through a Foucauldian biopolitical logic. Secular theodicy governs uncertainty through the production of economies of knowledge that rationalize processes of criminalization and securitization of entire groups and justify the use of violence. This process is particularly striking when analysing the use of torture in the so-called 'war on terror'. Through a comparison with medieval practices and focusing on the cases of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, the article shows how secular torture is the product of a biopolitical theodicy aimed at governing uncertainty through the construction of the tortured as immanent evils who threaten our 'good life' and 'deserve' their treatment. Secular theodicy turns torture in an extreme form of governmentality of uncertainty in which the disciplining of conduct becomes the construction of subjectivities based on essentialist, stereotypical, and racist – and for these very reasons, *reassuring* – economies of knowledge.

**Key words:** governmentality of uncertainty, theodicy and sociodicy, torture, rationalities of violence, secularism, biopolitics, Weber, Foucault

## Introduction

With an impressive acceleration following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the political and scholarly debate has witnessed a profusion of publications on the relationship between religion and violence. In this debate, two positions have emerged with particular force. On the one hand are scholars like Mark Juergensmeyer who maintain that religious acts of violence tend to be comparatively more destructive, intractable, and uncompromising than secular ones. The reason, he contends, is that the latter are primarily 'strategic' acts based on the principle of calculative rationality, and therefore not aimed at causing more harm than needed, whereas religious violence stands for divine truths and thus defies means-ends rationality as it mostly pursues 'symbolic' goals (Juergensmeyer 2003: 123; see also Duffy Toft 2007). On the other hand, scholars like William Cavanaugh argue that it is impossible to distinguish between religious and secular acts of violence because '[w]hat counts as religious or secular in any given context is a function of different configurations of power' (Cavanaugh 2009: 4). Accordingly, labelling certain acts of violence as religious serves as a legitimating function for the secular nation-state and its subjects, whose violence can thus be justified as 'rational, peace making, and sometimes regrettably necessary' to contain the violence of religious fanatics (Cavanaugh 2009: 4).

While broadly sympathetic to Cavanaugh's argument, this article moves from the perspective that its deconstructive endeavour also falls short of explanatory power. In denouncing the power/knowledge regimes that oversee the constitution of the category of 'religious violence', Cavanaugh's approach empties the concept of religious and secular violence of any substantive meaning, thus making it impossible to investigate how the process of secularization has contributed to transforming sovereign violence in its logics, meanings and practices. The aim of this article is to begin such an investigation by exploring the problem of governing uncertainty in the secular age by focusing on the theological notion of theodicy as the underlying rationale for the use of torture in the so-called 'war on terror'.

The question of governing uncertainty in the secular age has largely been neglected in security studies. The problem of uncertainty, however, acquires new salience when God 'leaves the world stage', as human beings can no longer explain tragic events as part of a transcendent order and must find immanent causes for the 'evils' that surround them (Beck, 2006: 333). Hence, taking cue from Max Weber's notion of 'theodicy of good fortune', this article argues that in the secular age the problem of theodicy – how to reconcile the existence of God with the presence of evil in the world – does not disappear, but is mobilised through a Foucauldian biopolitical logic that introduces 'a break into the domain of life that is under power's control' (Foucault 2003, 254). The primary purpose of

secular theodicy is to govern uncertainty through the production of economies of knowledge that rationalize processes of securitization and criminalization of entire groups. The members of these groups – the immanent evil and source of threat – become responsible not for what they have done, but for who they are – that is, their identity becomes the very justification for the violence inflicted on them in a process in which state violence is also a process of construction of threatening subjectivities.

This process, the article will show, is particularly striking when analysing the use of torture in the so-called ‘war on terror’. The theodicy that underpinned medieval torture mobilised an economy of knowledge that made evil intelligible as part of God’s grand design and torture as a process of restoration of a simultaneously immanent and transcendent order. Secular modernity can no longer justify the violence of torture as a process of restoration of God’s order on earth, and yet has failed to provide a rational explanation for this practice. Indeed, the idea that torture may be considered a scientific practice capable to produce reliable knowledge and actionable intelligence useful to save lives is not supported by scientific and empirical evidence (see, in particular, Welch 2009 and McCoy 2007, 2012). Secular torture, it will be argued, is instead the product of a biopolitical theodicy aimed at governing uncertainty through the construction of the tortured as immanent evils who threaten our ‘good life’ and thus ‘deserve’ their treatment. Secular theodicy, in other words, has turned torture in an extreme form of governmentality of uncertainty in which the disciplining of conduct becomes the construction of subjectivities based on essentialist, stereotypical, and racist – and for these very reasons, *reassuring* – economies of knowledge.

The arguments advanced in this article should be understood as a contribution to security studies through a *deepening* of the relationship between security and secularism – hence, as a contribution to an area of inquiry, ‘the complex interplays between security and religion’, that remains still largely ‘underresearched’ (Booth 2007: 448). Modern rationalities of violence and security in the fight against terrorism cannot be understood without taking into account how they are derivative of theological narratives such as theodicy. This perspective, however, goes beyond Carl Schmitt’s (2007: 42) often cited claim that ‘all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts’. It is not enough to observe that our thinking about politics, security, and violence continues to be crucially informed by religious concepts and categories, but it is necessary to understand how these concepts and categories play out in the tensions of the modern secular project. Hence the questions that this article will strive to address: How do secularization and secular theodicy affect the modern governmentality of uncertainty? How can they help explain the use of torture in the so-called ‘war on terror’?

## 1. Governing uncertainty in a secular age

The impact of secularization on the question of governing uncertainty has been largely neglected in the security studies literature on precautionary risk management. However, as Ulrich Beck (1992; 2006a) has pointed out, humankind's attempts to rationalise and reduce risk in the face of uncertainty have unfolded through three macro-historical phases: pre-modernity, first modernity, and second modernity. Pre-modernity revolved around the idea that human beings lived in a God-given order where they had no control over tragic events such as droughts, famines, diseases, epidemics, or wars. The reduction of uncertainty, in this phase, was the practical rationalization and acceptance of these events as the expression of God's or the King's will (the latter being the earthly embodiment of God). It is with modernity, that is, with the death of God and the development of modern science, that human beings begin to believe that they live in a world of their own making, where they can exercise agency and thus actively intervene to reduce uncertainty and the related risks. 'From now on', Beck (2006a: 333) argues, 'human beings must find (or invent) their own explanations and justifications for the disasters which threaten them'. 'First modernity' was thus characterised by a fundamental belief in science as a tool of intervention and manipulation of the outside world, as well as by a conceptualisation of risk as localised, calculable and compensable. 'The security dream of first modernity', writes Beck (2006a: 334), 'was based on the scientific utopia of making the unsafe consequences and dangers of decisions ever more controllable'.

This utopia, however, has been shattered by the arrival of the second modernity. Science has proven increasingly unable to assist human beings in providing answers to, let alone effectively control, risks that they have actively created such as climate change, global financial crises, the dangers associated with genetic manipulations, global terrorism, and new forms of war. These risks are global in character and unforeseeable in their consequences. A terrorist attack can strike anywhere and climate change knows no national boundaries. Equally, we do not know the magnitude and the effects of the next terrorist attack or global warming. Hence, in the current 'second modernity', the logic of non-ambiguity has been replaced by a logic of ambiguity 'in which the realms of the social, religious and political are governed by something like an Uncertainty principle' (Beck 2010: 67).

The attempt to resist the uncertainty of the modern secular condition has produced two main outcomes. First, it has contributed to a modern revival of faith. For Beck (2010: 85) new '[r]eligious belief spreads in proportion to the growth of insecurity triggered by radicalized modernization processes in every sphere of human social activity'. New religious beliefs are not anti-modern, but thoroughly modern. They do not seek to revive the orthodox framework of institutionalized religions, but are the expression of 'a new kind of subjective anarchy of belief' (Beck 2010: 85) that,

in order to restore a dimension of subjective certainty against the ambiguity and moral relativism of modernity, authorizes the use of fundamentalist violence (Beck 2010: 171).

The counterpoint to this process has been a paradoxical and even greater reliance on science and technology as means to reduce uncertainty through the development of precautionary and pre-emptive risk management. This approach no longer rests on the calculation of possible scenarios, but on the 'creative imagination of disaster and catastrophe' (De Goede, 2008: 157) based not on what we know, but on 'what we do not know' (Aradau and Van Munster, 2007: 102). As François Ewald (2002: 284) argues, transnational terrorism, climate change and global pandemics confront us with 'the possibility of serious and irreversible damage' and the incapacity of science and technology to provide answers. Given that now damage concerns 'the irreparable, the irremediable, the uncompensable', the concern is 'preventing, forbidding, sanctioning and punishing' not just what could be reasonably expected or anticipated, but 'what one can only imagine, suspect, presume or fear' (Ewald, 2002: 284-86). This has resulted into a general climate of 'doubt, suspicion, ... fear, and anxiety' (Ewald, 2002: 294) that, according to Beck (2006a: 335), has contributed to blurring 'the boundary between rationality and hysteria'. The result is that

in order to protect their populations from the danger of terrorism, states increasingly limit civil rights and liberties, with the result that in the end the open, free society may be abolished, but the terrorist threat is by no means averted. The dark irony here is that, while very general risk-induced doubts in the benevolence of the promises of governments to protect their citizens lead to criticisms of the inefficiency of scholarly and state authorities, critics are blind to the possibilities of erecting (or expanding) the authoritarian state on this very inefficiency (Beck, 2006a: 335-36).

Beck seems to suggest that the expansion of the authoritarian state and the related compression of individual freedoms to fight terrorist threats may be a potentially 'irrational' and 'inefficient' response of governments under pressure from a concerned and distraught public opinion which demands a security that governments cannot deliver. Indeed, he (2006b) argues, governments have no way of knowing that the security measures adopted and the violence deployed are rational from an instrumental point of view because 'neither science, nor the politics in power, nor the mass media, nor business, nor the law nor even the military are in a position to define or control risks rationally'. This argument, however, does not seem to take into account the possibility that the authoritarian state may not be the product of irrational, inefficient or misguided assumptions, but the outcome of a governmental rationality which has as its goal not exclusively and not primarily security but the power to conduct of conduct of others (Foucault 1991).

Certainly, 'the current practices and technologies of risk deployed in the war on terror' such as 'profiling populations, surveillance, intelligence, knowledge about catastrophe management, prevention' (Aradau and Van Munster 2007: 91), extraordinary rendition, administrative detention, and torture, may appear to be instrumental to achieve the reduction of risk and uncertainty associated with the terrorist threat. However, the very nature of the threat – based on the unforeseeable, the unknown unknowns, something we do not even know exists (Beck 2006: 335) – suggests that these measures may be the opportunity to establish new governmental practices that 'affect behaviour and "construct" forms of ordered agency and subjectivity in the population to be governed' (Aradau and Van Munster 2007: 97), including the willing acceptance of security measures that curb individual freedoms, undermine equality, and treat human dignity as a disposable commodity. From this perspective, the uncertainty of the current 'second modernity' has not had a subtractive effect on state power – governing *despite* uncertainty – but a productive one – governing *through* uncertainty. Uncertainty has become something that needs to be governed and yet an opportunity for establishing new forms of power.

In the next section, elaborating on the work of Max Weber and Michel Foucault, I analyse how the combined effect of *governing uncertainty* and *governing through uncertainty* that characterises secular governmentality relies on the economies of knowledge of secular theodicy. The latter constructs 'threatening others' as immanent sources of evil and justifies the infliction of violence on them on the ground that this is necessary to preserve the life that is worth living.

## 2. Theodicy, governmentality, and biopolitics

In Weber's theory of secularization, religion, rationalization, and the attempt to reduce uncertainty are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing dimensions which all spring from a common root, namely, the problem of theodicy. The question is the following: 'How is it that a power which is said to be at once omnipotent and kind could have created such an irrational world of undeserved suffering, unpunished injustice and hopeless stupidity?' (Weber 1946: 122) How is it possible, in other words, that God allows the manifestation of evil? Weber considers irrationality and uncertainty as two sides of the same coin, and religions as the first forms of practical rationalization which aimed to address the irrationality and uncertainty of the world stemming from the problem of theodicy. Accordingly, religious doctrines such as the original sin, the principle of the corrupt nature of humanity, the idea that evil is a necessary corollary of God's gift of free will, predestination, reincarnation or a better life in heaven, are all manifestations of a practical rationality that made

violence and suffering meaningful and acceptable as part of God's transcendent order and legitimized the use of violence in the name of that very order.

According to Weber, however, these rationalizations also raised a question of entitlement for those who were spared the evils of suffering and violence. Although most philosophers and theologians have looked at theodicy as the problem of how to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the existence of God, Weber considered that a fundamental dimension of theodicy was also to explain the absence of evil for those who were fortunate enough to be spared its consequences. Hence, for the German sociologist, a related but hardly explored (indeed, by Weber himself) corollary of the 'theodicy of suffering' was the 'theodicy of good fortune'. This is how he (1946: 271) explains the latter: 'The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he "deserves" it, and above all, that he deserves it in comparison with others. He wishes to be allowed the belief that the less fortunate also merely experiences his due. Good fortune thus wants to be "legitimate" fortune'. Religion, Weber (1946: 271) continues, has contributed to rationalize the inequality between groups or classes on behalf of 'all ruling men, the propertied, the victorious, and the healthy' by 'treating suffering as a symptom of odiousness in the eyes of the gods and as a sign of secret guilt'.

Although Weber discusses theodicy as part of a religious epistemic framework, this notion refers also, if not more importantly, to 'non-religious situations' (Swedberg 2005: 274). Indeed, social theory has paid attention to the idea of 'sociodicy', a secularized term for theodicy that shifts the explanation of the problem of evil in the world from God to the social domain. Sociodicy has been employed to account for those secular narratives that rationalize and legitimize conditions of inequality, exploitation and violence and 'offer explanations justifying apparently adverse conditions by revealing their hidden or "latent" benefits and functions' (Morgan and Wilkinson 2001: 200).

These narratives include, among others, the liberal idea that income inequalities can be an incentive for the worst-off to improve their condition with benefits for the society as a whole through 'the invisible hand' of the market, and the notion that 'political apathy' may be necessary for 'modern democratic systems' which would otherwise collapse if 'participation became widespread' (Elster 1981: 10). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 35; 2003: 33) has argued that neo-liberalism 'has become the supreme form of a conservative sociodicy' which, on the one hand, 'justifies suffering on the ground that it is necessary for economic progress', and on the other legitimates a 'racism of intelligence' which depicts the poor as 'intellectually incapable' and therefore responsible for their own condition. Loïc Wacquant (2009: 6) contends that 'orthodox economic science' has been 'promoted to the rank of official theodicy' of a neo-Darwinist and penal social order. Whereas the



former 'praises the "winners" for their vigor and intelligence and vituperates the "losers" in the "struggle for [economic] life" by pointing to their character flaws and behavioural deficiencies', the latter encloses 'stigmatised populations' in ghettos/social prisons and prisons/judicial ghettos in order to 'neutralize the material and/or symbolic threat that [they pose]... for the broader society' (Wacquant 2009: 6, 198). Hence, in the practical rationalizations of sociodicy, a process of criminalization and securitization takes place whereby the poor become a threat to democracy, the homeless to security, the migrant to identity, the homosexual to morality and the family, the Muslim to secular or Christian values, and so on.

These examples show elements of both the theodicy of suffering and of good fortune. The condition of the poor – their suffering – is necessary for the common good, but is also their responsibility, and thus they 'only have what they deserve' (Bourdieu cited in Grenfell 2004: 133), in the same way that the wealthy and successful deserve their fortune. Yet, these examples also point to a dimension not explored by Weber, namely, how the poor and the marginalised may represent a threat, a source of risk and uncertainty for the society as a whole – and in particular for the dominant groups within society – that requires the adoption of measures of punishment, containment, and control.

This latter point raises a central question for our discussion: If the problem of theodicy has survived the process of secularization by turning into sociodicy, and given that, following Weber, the very problem of uncertainty stems from theodicy, how does secular theodicy affect the modern governmentality of uncertainty? In order to answer this question, I will analyse how the concept of sociodicy, although never explicitly discussed by Michel Foucault, can be seen to have an important role in his account of the transformation of power from sovereignty to governmentality.

According to Foucault's famous argument (1978: 136), until the nineteenth century, 'power was exercised mainly as a means of deduction', with the sovereign entitled 'to appropriate a portion of the wealth, a tax of products, goods and services, labor and blood, levied on the subjects'. The sovereign held sway over life 'only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing', which means that sovereignty was ultimately 'the right to *take* life or *let* live' (Foucault 1978, 136). In the nineteenth century, however, a profound transformation starts to take place. Power turns primarily into one of production, whose main task is to 'incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize and organize' life (Foucault 1978, 136). 'The ancient right to *take* life or *let* live', Foucault contends (1978, 138), 'was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death', thus marking the birth of biopolitics, which can be considered 'the core issue of governmentality' (Lemm and Vatter,

2014: 2).<sup>1</sup> Power no longer manifests itself exclusively through the law, but through a series of disciplinary and regulatory apparatuses and regimes, such as the police, schools, health insurance systems, patterns of consumption, education, and reproduction (Foucault 2003, 250–251). These regimes are not enacted through a direct exercise of sovereign power, but through processes of internalisation of norms, codes, and models of behaviour that directly invest life. In this politics-turned-biopolitics, these regimes are designed to inscribe a specific order onto the body which may enable the ‘increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls’ (Foucault 1978, 139), and create the framework of conduct in which individuals may govern themselves.

It can be suggested that sovereign power and biopolitical power rest on different tensions. Sovereign power as ‘the right to take life or let live’, is grounded in the ‘Hobbesian paradox’, or ‘the paradox of modern contractarianism’ (see Baumgold 2009). Individuals consent to the constitution of a sovereign power in order to escape the state of nature ‘where every man is Enemy to every man’ (Hobbes 2008: 84) and life is constantly threatened. The state of nature is a product of a nominalist idea of God, what Weber calls *deus absconditus* (hidden God), that is, a God separated from the world who does not intervene in establishing peace and order in human affairs. Hence, as Foucault (2003: 241) explains, ‘It is in order to live that they [the subjects] constitute a sovereign’. However, as Hobbes maintains, for sovereignty to effectively carry out this task it must be absolute and thus include a right to kill one’s own subjects. In the classical age, as Foucault calls it, the individual was caught between a hidden God who refrained from intervening in human affairs – thus leaving the door open for a life-threatening worldly condition – and a worldly sovereign power who, in exchange for the protection of life, advocated to himself the right to kill – thus allowing the possibility of injustice, suffering and violence. In the context of sovereign power, I want to suggest, the theodicy of suffering was the ideological construct that stabilized this tension by rationalizing it. It reduced uncertainty by making the evils of injustice, suffering and violence part of God’s design, of an underlying truth, of an order of creation thus made meaningful.

Biopolitical power seemingly overcomes this tension as the main purpose of power becomes fostering life, but immediately creates a new paradox. If the atomic bombs, the 20<sup>th</sup> century genocides, or the capacity to produce universally destructive viruses are also the outcome of biopolitics, ‘[h]ow can a power such as this kill, if it is true that its basic function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances, to avoid accidents, and to compensate for failings?’ (Foucault 2003: 254). For Foucault, the power of killing is inscribed in the very notion of biopolitics,

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault himself argued that liberalism, as a type of governmentality, should be understood ‘as the general framework of biopolitics’ (Foucault 2010: 22; see also Lemm and Vatter 2014: 8).

which is not an unqualified attempt to promote life, but a specific attempt to promote life that is *worth* living and is threatened by forms of life considered less valuable. This means that with the shift from sovereignty to biopolitics/governmentality, killing turns into a rational and racialized practice necessary to foster the 'good' life represented by certain 'races' against the 'bad' or 'inferior' life expressed by other 'races' (Foucault 2003: 255).

In a context of secular uncertainty in which the evils of suffering, insecurity, fear and violence can no longer be made meaningful by referring to the 'transcendent Other' of God, the 'superior races' – what Weber describes as 'all ruling men, the propertied, the victorious, and the healthy' – must find 'immanent others' as responsible for the threats that surround them. Hence in a secular age in which the world is no longer God-given, but a construction of the ruling classes, the wealthy, the healthy, the civilized, the moderns, and the rational, the secular theodicy of good fortune is a form of rationalization that, mobilised through biopolitical logics, introduces 'a break into the domain of life that is under power's control' (Foucault 2003, 254) and authorizes the use of violence. Violence thus becomes a governmental practice whose instrumental task is not, primarily, to contain or eliminate the threat stemming from certain populations, but to construct identities and subjectivities: the poor, the barbarians, the premoderns, the fundamentalists, the fanatics, those who want to destroy our way of life on the one hand; the liberal, civilised, secularised and democratic on the other. The secular theodicy of good fortune at the heart of biopolitics legitimizes this divide by justifying the condition of the former and the violence inflicted onto them 'as a sign of secret guilt', in a framework in which the fortunate and the less fortunate 'deserve their due'.

This argument suggests that theodicy continue to play an important role in rationalizing and justifying modern forms of violence. Yet, these rationalizations are the product a secular economy of knowledge. Religious rationalizations of violence rested on the idea of an underlying correspondence between the immanent world and the transcendent order, and interpreted and justified suffering – and the infliction of suffering – as part of this theological framework. In secular modernity, suffering is no longer the expression of God's design, but a social pathology engendered by those forces and agents – the lesser races – that wish to disrupt the good life. These forces are not transcendent, but immanent and thus the economy of knowledge that oversees secular forms of violence focuses on the capacity – or the illusion of the capacity – to know, measure, control and ultimately master these forces. However, in the modern biopolitical order, the process of knowledge, measurement, control and mastery is also a process of construction of threatening and 'evil' subjectivities.

In the next section, this conceptual framework will be employed to account for the shift from medieval practices of torture – primarily informed by the theodicy of suffering – to secular forms of torture – primarily shaped by a biopolitical theodicy of good fortune. The focus will be on how

torture in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib may be understood as a form of governmentality of uncertainty that rests on and fosters forms of biopolitical racialization unknown to medieval forms of torture.

### 3. Theodicy and the secularization of torture

The economy of knowledge that characterized medieval forms of torture up to the eighteenth century revolved around the quest for coherence between the immanent and the transcendent order. At the heart of this quest was the tension of the classical model of sovereignty – the Hobbesian paradox, with the individual caught between a hidden God and an earthly ruler who protected life but also had the right to kill and inflict violence – which had in the theodicy of suffering a way to stabilize its contradictions. As Foucault explains in his classic *Discipline and Punish*, the purpose of torture was not so much to redress the injury suffered by its victim, but to repair the crime committed against the law, itself expression of sovereign power. The crime was a direct attack to the body of the sovereign and torture as a public spectacle was ‘a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted’ (Foucault 1995: 48). Albeit sovereignty was a prerogative of the king or the prince, it was itself based on the ‘king’s two bodies’, namely the idea that the king was ‘the vicar of God and his minister on earth’ called to serve his rule and have it respected (Kantorowicz 1997: 155). As the only one who had the power to mediate between God and the world, the king was also the ‘Supreme Pastor’ capable to interpret and enforce the Law of God (Hobbes 2008). For this reason, torture was a form of repentance for the crime that had been committed against God and the king, and therefore a way to restore an immanent order, itself expression of a transcendent order.

To restore the violated order, the king exercised his sovereign right to kill through the infliction suffering. The theodicy that characterized this notion of sovereignty endowed ‘pain with a constructive meaning: pain was useful; it was a way to unlock secrets of the human mind and the human body’ (Cohen 2010: 4). The ultimate goal of torture was in fact to obtain a confession, that is, the *truth* (Kahn 2008: 22, 26), in the form of admission of guilt and recognition on the part of the offender that his action had caused offence to both God and the king. In this respect, the evil of torture was not just ‘punishment from God’, but also ‘a spiritual opportunity’ for reconciliation: ‘To suffer was to eliminate the self, the will, and self consciousness in order to make room for God, God’s will, and consciousness of the divine’ (Silverman 2010: 5, 8).

Together with the pain of the tortured, whose bodies were pierced, burned, quartered, hooked, and dismembered according to sophisticated techniques aimed at maximizing their physical suffering, an

essential component of torture was the public and its fear. Torture was public because it stood as 'an example, not only by making people aware that the slightest offence was likely to be punished, but by arousing feelings of terror by the spectacle of power letting its anger fall upon the guilty person' (Foucault 1995: 58). Its public nature made this fear palpable and present as it annulled the distance between the public and the tortured, and required further rationalizations of what was being witnessed: How could God possibly allow such evil violence? Was there not a magnification of the original crime in a spiral of violence and suffering that left no room for hope? A sophistication of the theodicy of suffering resulted in endless rationalizations: the pain of the condemned would 'be counted as penitence and so alleviate the punishments of the beyond'; likewise, the possibility that the tortured would die soon after the beginning of the procedure could suggest that the person was not guilty and therefore God in all his mercy had spared him unnecessary suffering (Foucault 1995: 45-46). Ultimately, the theodicy of suffering rationalized the infliction of violence through an economy of knowledge that framed torture as a means to restore coherence between the immanent and the transcendent order.

At the end of the eighteenth century, as the process of secularization advanced – with the effect that man started to replace God 'as the foundation of knowledge and being in the order of creation' (Mavelli 2012: 59), and the link between immanent and transcendent order became weaker – the economy of knowledge mired in the religious framework which had made possible the public spectacle of torture started to crumble. With the modern shift from sovereignty to biopolitics/governmentality – hence with the shift from 'the right to take life or let live' to the 'power to foster life' – the theodicy of suffering alone was no longer capable to provide a justification for the excruciating pain endured by the tortured and the utmost savagery of its public representation. Hence, Foucault (1995: 9) documents, the tortured criminal started to become in the eyes of the public 'an object of pity or admiration'; the true criminal was the executioner, if not the sovereign himself whose 'power to kill' appeared no longer to be sanctioned by divine authority.

This shift marks the decline of traditional torture as a modern form of punishment as Foucault suggests, and lays the foundation for the emergence of torture in its modern secular form. According to Darius Rejali (2003: 151), '[m]odern torture is distinguished from classical torture in three ways. Classical tortures were performed in public whereas modern tortures are almost never seen in public. Classical torture produced effects by writing on the body, e.g. branding and scarring. Modern torture leaves scars to be sure, but it aims not at the body but at something beyond the body [...] Finally, modern tortures draw on clinical expertise, whereas tradition and religion guide classical torturers as they scar bodies'.

In order to understand what made possible this shift from public to private, from body to mind, and from ritual to medicalized procedure, we need to explore how the secularization of theodicy has contributed to the emergence of new economies of knowledge. These have shifted the justification of torture from the theodicy of suffering to the theodicy of good fortune, and, accordingly, the rationale of torture from the crime committed to the subjectivity of the alleged perpetrators, and the goal of torture from the restoration of a simultaneously immanent and transcendent order to a form of governmentality of uncertainty through the construction of the tortured as immanent evils who threaten our 'good life' and thus 'deserve' their treatment.

In the case of the Guantanamo detainees, their nature (or 'subjectivity'), more than a detailed account of their crimes, has been the key justification that US authorities have provided for the use of 'exceptional' measures. These detainees have been portrayed as 'among the most dangerous, best-trained, vicious killers on the face of the earth' and as potential 'ticking bombs' (irrespective of their innocence), ready to 'detonate' if set free (former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, 2002, quoted in Rose, 2004: 134 and Diken and Laustsen, 2008: 97), who are 'hell-bent on our destruction and destroying our way of life' (US Senator Lindsey Graham, 2013, quoted in McManus, 2013). Their lives have emerged as a threat to our capacity to grow, expand and flourish – that is, as a threat to our 'good fortune' – in a discourse which has framed them as worse than medieval sinners on the scaffold. Whereas the latter were people who had committed the most ignominious crimes, but who could still repent and redeem themselves through the ritual of public torture, the lives of those whom the US administration has repeatedly referred to as 'the worst of the worst' (Ballen and Bergen, 2008) appear to belong to an 'inferior', 'bad race', whose only aim in life is to destroy our lives and who therefore 'deserve their due'.

Indeed, the very segregation of the detainees in Guantanamo signals a 'distancing' (Wilcox 2011: 111) that did not exist in classical torture given the proximity between the tortured and the public. As was argued, this proximity was a disciplinary measure, but also an indication that they belonged to the same human community. This meant, among other things, that the tortured would not be denied an ultimate act of compassion, that is, death, which would mean freedom from their agony and reconciliation with the divine. This compassion, however, has been denied to the Guantanamo prisoners, who have been described as the 'worst of the worst', but not as 'worthless', with many of them portrayed as 'high-value detainees' in consideration of the intelligence they could provide.

Harvesting intelligence is a task that requires the exercise of 'violence for the extraction of information' but also 'care for the preservation of their useful lives' (Wilcox 2011: 103). An extreme manifestation of this biopolitical care can be observed in practices of force-feeding, the response of US authorities to the hunger strikes that have occurred in Guantanamo since its opening, with peaks

in 2005, 2009 and 2013, particularly among detainees who had been freed of charges and yet would not be released. These practices included strapping the detainees into special chairs which restrain the whole body, force-feeding them with tubes inserted into their noses and throats to pump food directly into their stomach, keeping them under observation and further confined to their chairs to prevent vomiting (JTF-JMG 2013).

In his 1976 Lectures, Foucault (2003: 248) observed that death should be considered 'a manifestation of transition from one [immanent] power to another [transcendent power]'. In the secular biopolitical order, where the 'power to foster life' becomes a central prerogative of power and no transcendent power exists, the 'end of life' is also 'the moment when the individual escapes all power' (Foucault 2003: 248). The totalizing hold of biopower over life is part of a new economy of the body and of knowledge that deems 'biological life, rather than labor power, [as] the source of surplus value' (Vatter 2009: 1). Guantanamo (and other prisons such as Abu Ghraib) should therefore be understood as biopolitical factories where torture is the procedure employed for the extraction of surplus value in the form of valuable information – knowledge – believed to be useful to save lives and help to defeat terrorism. This 'surplus value' is ultimately a 'surplus life', as the life subtracted from the prisoners through torture is allocated to the life of the 'superior race' fighting terrorism. The latter, unhindered from this existential threat, will be able to grow, proliferate and expand and deserve their 'good fortune' according to the precepts of modern secular theodicy.

For this transfer of value to be possible, however, there must be certainty that the method employed will not prompt false intelligence and will not kill the tortured. It is from these two concerns that modern practices of torture, rebranded in the context of the war on terror as 'enhanced interrogation techniques', have developed. Alfred McCoy (2007) traces their genealogy to the techniques of psychological torture researched and tested by the CIA in the 1950s. This approach, also known as 'no-touch torture', includes a combination of techniques such as self-inflicted pain (stress positions such as standing on a box with one's arm wide open for hours or being chained to a bolt on the floor for days, thus forcing the tortured to soil themselves), sensory deprivation (being hooded for hours, prolonged isolation, temperature manipulation, being exposed to loud noise for extended period times), cultural and sexual humiliation (being forced to wear women's clothes, forced nudity) and other techniques, such as the infamous waterboarding where the physical and psychological effect are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. These techniques, which have been widely used in Guantanamo, rest on two seemingly scientific assumptions: physical torture creates resistance whereas psychological torture combined with self-inflicted pain can contribute to unlocking the secrets of the mind of the prisoner and force him to deliver valuable information.

The idea of torture as a scientific practice carried out by ‘experts’ is reflected in the increasing involvement of health professionals during the ‘enhanced interrogations’, particularly in Guantanamo. Their presence has been required to insure that the threshold of ‘severe physical and mental pain’ (what counts as torture according to the US Code) would not be crossed both for legal reasons – so that the officials carrying out the ‘enhanced interrogations’ could not be persecuted – and because crossing this threshold would increase the possibility of unreliable information, as the tortured would say anything to stop the pain or because the excessive deterioration of their state of mind would impair memory, understanding, and capacity to deliver information. Accordingly, health professionals would monitor oxygenation, pressure, and other key vital functions and perform medical procedures, such as administering saline solutions to counter the dehydration caused by waterboarding. Their task was to increase the effectiveness of the torture techniques employed – by collecting and analyzing the results of the interrogations and seeking ‘to derive generalizable inferences to be applied to subsequent interrogations’ (PHR 2010: 3, see also PHR 2009) – as well as their ‘safety’. The latter should be understood as the attempt to hide ‘the truth by concealing injuries from forensic investigators in search of evidence of detainee mistreatment and torture’ (Welch 2009: 465) and, most of all, preventing that torture could end up with death, as this would result in the destruction of a potentially valuable asset, namely, the life of the tortured as a potential source of vital information.

There is, however, an underlying paradox at the heart of these practices. Their alleged scientific value and capacity to produce valuable intelligence which may save lives has been deeply questioned by a vast array of critics, including academics, intelligence and security experts, and interrogators themselves, who have pointed out how knowledge gained through torture is often useless or false (see in particular Welch 2009 and McCoy 2007, 2012). Questioning the ‘the myth of the instrumental rationality of torture’, Melanie Richter-Montpetit (2014: 45) observes that ‘despite the enormous efforts and resources invested, the USA’s post-9/11 global torture regime yielded not a single documented case of actionable data. If anything, critics including former CIA agents and other US intelligence officials argue that the use of torture has led to blowbacks due to false intelligence and disrupted relationships with prisoners who cooperated’. Moreover, as it has been extensively documented, the overwhelming majority of those detained and tortured in Guantanamo had no information at all to offer as they were either ‘low-level recruits who went to Afghanistan to support the Taliban or even innocent men swept up in the chaos of the war’ (2007 CIA report, cited in Richter-Montpetit 2014: 46-7). Why, then, despite this evidence, has the US administration persisted in a practice that is useless, illegal, immoral, and that has brought ‘discredit upon the U.S.



and its armed forces while undermining domestic and international support for the war effort' (McCoy 2006)?

In order to answer this question we need to consider how the secularized theodicy that justifies the use of torture is a key component of the modern governmentality of uncertainty, whose main task is to identify immanent causes for the threats that surround us, as it is no longer possible to explain evil as the expression of a God-given order. Although it is known that torture does not work, that it is useless, immoral and counterproductive, this knowledge is ignored in favour of a different economy of knowledge the main task of which is to preserve the belief that the state may act as the ultimate agent of salvation against the terrorist threat by unravelling the truth from the tortured. From this perspective, the instrumental rationality of torture is not in the valuable information it may produce, but in the construction of threatening subjectivities which may fit and comply with an already existing cognitive framework based on a secularised theodicy that sees the 'other' as a threat to our 'good fortune'. From this perspective, secular torture can be understood as a way of governing uncertainty through biopolitical racialization. It is no coincidence, then, that the violence carried out in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo revolved around sexual humiliation. As reported by journalist Seymour Hersh (2004):

The notion that Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation became a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the months before the March, 2003, invasion of Iraq. One book that was frequently cited was "The Arab Mind," a study of Arab culture and psychology, first published in 1973, by Raphael Patai, a cultural anthropologist who taught at, among other universities, Columbia and Princeton, and who died in 1996. The book includes a twenty-five-page chapter on Arabs and sex, depicting sex as a taboo vested with shame and repression. "The segregation of the sexes, the veiling of the women . . . and all the other minute rules that govern and restrict contact between men and women, have the effect of making sex a prime mental preoccupation in the Arab world," Patai wrote. Homosexual activity, "or any indication of homosexual leanings, as with all other expressions of sexuality, is never given any publicity. These are private affairs and remain in private." The Patai book, an academic told me, was "the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior." In their discussions, he said, two themes emerged—"one, that Arabs only understand force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation."

Hence, the naked detainees of Abu Ghraib stacked in a pyramid, being forced to wear female undergarments, or threatened with menstrual blood, were the object of torture techniques that construct the Muslim threatening other through the already existing cognitive framework exemplified by Orientalist texts such as *The Arab Mind* (see also Butler 2008: 16). The biopolitical

racialization enacted by torture rests on an underlying secular theodicy: The tortured deserve their due (their suffering) because they are 'the worst of the worst', the expression of Islamic pre-modern mores that stand in opposition to our Western progressive individual (sexual) freedoms and whose only goal is to annihilate our way of life (our good fortune).

In the secular age, which has to create meaning and order for itself as the world is no longer God-ordained, the governmentality of uncertainty encompasses the ontological construction of the tortured as the expression of an inferior life. Underpinned by a theodicy of good fortune, modern secular torture is the defence and celebration of life that is worth living against the 'bad' and 'inferior races' who merely deserve their destiny. Modern torture is the product of a secular economy of knowledge in which, as Weber reminds us, there are no inscrutable transcendent forces at play and everything, in principle, can be mastered. Accordingly, modern secular torture ceases to be ritual and becomes seemingly scientific practice underpinned by instrumental rationality whose main purpose is to reassure the 'fortunate' that the 'less fortunate' may be mastered, that their mind may be unlocked, that their secrets may be acted upon. However, the failure to provide scientific justification for the practice of torture requires the adoption of a theological framework of meaning, albeit in a secularized form. Secular theodicy thus turns torture in an essential component of the modern governmentality of uncertainty. The latter revolves around the construction of threatening identities based on essentialist, stereotypical, and racist forms of knowledge and produces a biopolitical racialization that reinforces our existing cognitive frameworks. The secular theodicy at the heart of this process makes the violence of secular torture meaningful and acceptable as the tortured terrorists end up merely deserving their due.

## Conclusion

According to William Cavanaugh (2009: 6), the idea that religions may be more prone to violence than secular ideologies is a myth because 'ideologies and institutions labelled secular can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as those labelled religious'. While agreeing with this argument, this article has tried to advance the discussion beyond the critique that the secular may be as violent as the religious by beginning an investigation on the economies of knowledge that shape and inform secular violence. The analysis has strived to fill an important gap in the security studies literature on governmentality and uncertainty by exploring how secularization has endowed modernity with a distinctive crisis of uncertainty which has made possible the development of new forms of governmentality based on secular theodicy. Biopolitics and secular theodicy have emerged as mutually sustaining power/knowledge regimes that justify and authorize secular forms of violence

by framing them as necessary and ultimately 'deserved' by those who suffer their consequences in order to preserve the 'good fortune' of the life that is worth living. Yet, the article argued, this violence is part of a governmental process of construction of identities whereby the threatening other is forced to comply with an already existing racialized knowledge for the purpose of governing uncertainty.

From this perspective, torture in the war on terror was shown to be more a project of construction of identities than an instrumental-rational endeavour aimed at extracting information that may save lives. Unlike medieval practices of torture – informed by the theodicy of suffering and aimed at re-establishing coherence between the immanent and the transcendent order – torture carried out in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo should be considered primarily an instantiation of the modern governmentality of uncertainty resting on a secular theodicy of good fortune. The latter operates through the construction of 'others' that 'fit' already existing essentialist, stereotypical, and racist cognitive frameworks – whether in the form of the terrorists who have no other goal than the destruction of our way of life, or in the shape of the backward Muslim subject. The comparison with medieval practices showed how, in the process of secularization, torture has not become more 'human' or rational, but has simply been informed by a different economy of knowledge that can no longer explain evil as the product of a transcendent order and has to find 'immanent others' as responsible for the threats that surround us.

The *deepening* of the relationship between security and secularism advanced in this article was guided by the idea that 'security is a derivative concept' of an underlying political theory (Booth, 2007: 109, 150), and that, therefore, 'questions about security cannot be separated from the most basic questions of political theory' (Walker, 1997: 63). In exploring how secularization has affected modern perceptions of uncertainty and how secular theodicy shapes and justifies modern forms of violence such as torture, this article has strived to advance the debate on the relationship between security and subjectivity. In this regard, this article suggests that the 'freedom from religion' of the modern secular condition cannot just be understood as a form of liberation, but also as an absence, that includes an underlying condition of uncertainty. Indeed, it cannot be ignored that 'modernity does not "liberate man in his own being"; [rather] it compels him to face the task of producing himself' in the 'empty space' left by God (Foucault 1984: 166-67). This sense of absolute freedom, which encompasses the very construction of subjectivity, cannot be separated from a condition of uncertainty that instrumental rationality cannot address, as the capacity to manipulate and control the world ultimately remains beyond human reach, no matter how powerful a state may be. Secular violence such as torture thus becomes a tool of the governmentality of uncertainty that operates

through the construction of threatening others as immanent source of evil. This process draws on an exploitation of the fear of the unknown, which is also the main question at the heart of theodicy.

Indeed, the theological problem of theodicy is one of lack of knowledge: precisely because we do not know whether God exists we ask how his (or her) existence may be reconciled with something – evil – that is antithetical to his (or her) very being. Ultimately, the existence of God and the manifestation of evil are reconciled by inscribing the latter into the grand design of the former, and by conceiving of evil as good for human beings (however cryptic and inscrutable this good may be). In the modern secular order, however, there is no grand design and the responsibility of evil shifts from the transcendent Other (God) to the immanent other (the terrorist), who becomes a threat to our lives and, as such, can become the object of our violence, which he ‘rightly deserves’. However, despite their physical nature, the terrorists/immanent others remain almost as unknown as God because there is often no way to know who they are and when they may strike. The response to this lack of knowledge and condition of uncertainty is the biopolitical theodicy explored in this article: the construction of identities and subjectivities that may embody – and by embody, somehow circumscribe and give the illusion of mastering – that very threat.

However, to the extent that the construction of identity cannot happen in isolation from the construction of difference, the construction of threatening others is also the construction of ourselves. Governing the uncertainty of terrorism becomes the opportunity for new governmental practices aimed at disciplining conducts and establishing new forms of power that make us more apathetic in accepting of security measures that restrain individual freedoms, undermine equality, and deem human dignity as a disposable luxury. Resisting this power, this article suggests, requires us ‘Westerners’ to be aware of the multiple layers of religious meanings that shape our life. To understand us as ‘beyond’ these religious significations, and to project these significations onto alleged religious – often Muslim – ‘others’ is not only inaccurate but dangerous, as it condemns us to a present of which we can only grasp scattered fragments, lending ourselves to and making ourselves complicit in the biopolitical sociodicy of existing forms of domination and violence.

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