Book Review

Bakir, V. 2013. *Torture, Intelligence and Sousveillance in the War on Terror. Agenda-Building Struggles*. Farnham: Ashgate.

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In April 2004, a *60 Minutes* news report and an article in *The New Yorker* magazine revealed instances of torture and abuse by US Army and CIA personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison. This was probably the first time that what some had been reporting and exposing since the aftermath of 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror had a profound impact on global public opinion and forced the US authorities to acknowledge that safeguards had failed and human-rights violations had taken place.

Abu Ghraib was but one more case in a long series of stories that highlighted that torture-for-intelligence had become a common policy among Western secret service agencies. However, the fact that in the Abu Ghraib case the accusations were backed up by pictures leaked to the media ('sousveillance') played a big role in the impact the story had, and shaped the way in which governmental PR (or Strategic Political Communication, SPC, as the author calls it) dealt with the accusations.

In *Torture, Intelligence and Sousveillance in the War on Terror*, Vian Bakir, Senior Lecturer in Journalism at Bangor University (Wales, UK) uses a 'protagonist-led', comparative approach to retrace a series of agenda-building struggles related to the torture-intelligence apparatus in the context of the War on Terror, looking at the interplay between the stories themselves and how they were picked up and represented by the Third, Fourth and Fifth Estates (the legislatures, news and current affairs outlets and the realm of digital and social media).

Using an impressive amount of sources and references, the author traces back high-profile cases that involved the use of torture by US and British military. Thus, the story of John Walker Lindh, 'The American Taliban', is a 'sousveillance failure' that is used to represent the difficulties encountered by those trying to make torture-for-surveillance an issue and expose the manipulative character of SPC as early as 2001. In the Abu Ghraib case, in 2004, the persistent work of NGOs, the commitment by some investigative journalists and the continued leakage of internal memos, documents and pictures managed to activate political investigations and have an impact on the political agenda, thus turning the tide and putting strain on the frames designed by those in power.

The second half of the book crosses the Atlantic to explore the instances of abuse and the struggle for legitimacy and moral authority in the UK by looking into the case of Baha Mousa, an Iraqi who died in custody while being questioned by British Soldiers. In this instance, the sousveillance photographs that were leaked to the media were found to be a hoax, but the pressure from NGOs and journalists in keeping the issue alive were key to re-opening an internal investigation and the inquiry that resulted in 2009.

Interestingly, the 'accumulation' of evidence in other cases strengthened the Baha Mousa case and made resistance to SPC easier and more effective. Finally, Bakir goes into the case of Binyam Mohamed—arrested in Pakistan, tortured in Morocco and held in Guantanamo for several years—and the instances of torture by British Intelligence. Here the emphasis is not so much on leaks and sousveillance but on the strategic use of secrecy and the struggles to expose silence as SPC.

Describing these four main cases and the many more that are rescued in the book, the author wants to give coherence to an issue that is much talked-about but seldom studied and systematised. Bakir wants to make sense of the history of torture in the context of the War on Terror, and does manage to provide a compelling account of manipulation, deception and secrecy. This empirical, protagonist-led approach is useful in conveying a sense of urgency and in making the research timely and relevant. However, such a dense, rich and broad story is not easy to 'dress up' academically. Faced with the need to make some sense of the empirical work, Bakir starts with two chapters on manipulation and ends with a conclusion that tries to organise the information laid out in the previous pages. She confesses that she never intended 'to produce a theoretically-dense book', but does mention Foucault and dives into agenda-building theory, providing glimpses of potential theoretical frameworks without going into them at length.

Some of the agendas she opens in this last chapter seem very promising—silences, frames, power, sousveillance, etc. However, it is difficult not to find this research agenda a bit rushed and incomplete. Some recent events contribute to the difficulty in finding 'closure' in the argument laid out—the advent of Wikileaks and the Snowden revelations point to an ever-evolving sousveillance 'apparatus' that is having a profound effect in the power-knowledge relationships. At the same time, the global political and financial crisis is affecting the ability of those in power to dictate and build agendas unilaterally or without contestation. Finally, the difficulty of researching what is secret should not be underestimated.

Overall, Bakir manages to vividly capture a crucial moment in the clash between the 'secret' torture-intelligence nexus and the possibilities of sousveillance and an empowered civil society. A clash that is likely to deepen in the near future and deserves to be studied. The fact that at some points it feels like the author is trying to accomplish too many things at the same time, however, is probably, above all, a result of the immediacy and secrecy of the object of study. A result of trying to do what is necessary but academically difficult—to capture a moving image that some would not want to see exposed.