

Torture and Othering

In 2018, Berkeley Law Committee Against Torture advertised an event entitled *Race and "Othering": Making Torture Possible* with the categorical statement, "Torture involves a fundamental act of 'othering' in order for it to be possible". Few people would disagree with this. Equally, few people like to think of themselves as capable of indulging in such acts of "othering", or, worse still, becoming torturers. In this Briefing we question these comfortable assumptions, and set this in the context of current political and societal developments.

Although the term "othering" has entered our vocabulary in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the behaviour it describes is far from new. In the Roman Empire, crucifixion was a punishment reserved for the lower orders – rebellious slaves and peasant insurrectionists.

Recent Legislation

Quakers and many others have, to their credit, opposed recent UK legislation which has sought to "other" refugees and asylum seekers. These have been dealt with in recent Q-CAT briefings - see Briefing 70 (*UK Legislation may lead to Inhuman and Degrading Treatment*, November 2021) on current and recent legislation, and Briefing 68 (*Inhuman and Degrading Treatment of Asylum-seekers and Refugees, a British tradition*, April 2021) on developments over a longer period of time.

How widespread are the attitudes which enable Othering to flourish?

We have found this shocking, and rightly so. But so much of it reflects subconscious "othering" which we fail to notice, or which we even practice ourselves. We only need to listen to how people speak of different groups to realise that our society is permeated with an "us and them" mentality, even amongst people who believe themselves to be above such attitudes – For example, people with a genuine concern for social justice may nevertheless refer to "the homeless" as an undifferentiated group, or Quakers might seek to explain the lack of diversity in Meetings with comments such as "They don't like our quiet worship", or "We need to encourage them to join us."

How does Othering affect people's attitude towards torture?

Research has shown that many people can be turned into torturers with surprising ease. Many people are familiar with Stanley Milgram's experiments in 1963 which showed that individuals would be prepared to inflict electric shocks on others, when instructed to do so by an authority figure.¹ These experiments, carried out only two years after the trial of Adolf Eichmann, sought to investigate what Milgram later referred to as "The Perils of Obedience"².

In 1973 Philip Zimbardo carried out the Stanford Prison Experiment in which students were randomly assigned roles as "prisoners" or "guards", in an attempt to find out if the brutality observed amongst prison guards was inherent in their personalities or if it was a result of environmental factors.³ The experiment, even in the short time of six days before it was stopped, showed that people would behave in a way expected of them in a particular role, as could be seen

¹<https://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html>

²https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2013/PSY268/um/43422262/Milgram_-_perils_of_obediance.pdf

³<https://www.simplypsychology.org/zimbardo.htm>

in the “guards” becoming increasingly more brutal as the experiment continued, and indeed going beyond what had been expected of them. The experiment showed that individuals can lose their sense of self and individuality when wearing a uniform, conforming to the social role of the uniform. So what happens when you put on any kind of uniform? It immediately marks you out as a member of a group, and everybody else who is not in the group becomes an “other”. The prime example of the uniformed force is, in any country, the army. There are many well-documented examples of how soldiers are brutalised; as recently as 1986, soldiers in Argentina were trained to torture dissidents.⁴

Also in 1986, two American psychologists claimed that any “ordinary” well-balanced and educated person could be trained to be a torturer. This training included brutal initiation rites such as being sworn at, punched, kicked, and forced to run until they collapsed. They were made to practise special rites which made them feel separate from society. When practising torture techniques they were praised for their “success” and punished for disobedience. They were also forced to undergo torture themselves. Although none of them took pleasure in these activities, they said that it was “part of the job” and that they had to obey authority. The psychologists said that these training techniques were similar to those used in the American military and pointed out that if, in the military, you are taught to kill people under obedience to authority, it is only one step further to torture people because people can convince themselves that this is a moral thing to do in certain situations.⁵

As Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out, “The main thing is to make the prisoner feel that he does not belong to the same species.”

Where does Britain stand in all this?

The United Kingdom does not have a glorious track record when we look at our role in using torture and in training others to use torture.

In 2004 after the revelations of torture inflicted on prisoners in Abu Ghraib, a British special forces officer stated that it was clear that the prison guards were using “R21” techniques but “didn’t know what they were doing”. British and US soldiers were trained in these “Resistance to Interrogation” techniques by themselves being submitted to such degradation techniques, but that information about such techniques had been disseminated in Iraq without proper checks or controls.⁶

Britain (like many other countries) has a long history of “Othering”. In 2016, the then Prime Minister Theresa May echoed the Nazis’ use of language when she told the Conservative Party conference that “if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere.” While she claimed to be targeting the elite who jet-set between tax havens, this felt shocking to those who believe that we can be a citizen of our street, our village, our town, our continent, our world.

When in 2020 Nigel Farage described people arriving on the shores of Kent as “an invasion” and “a national humiliation”, this encouraged Home Secretary Priti Patel to increase her attempts to block off all access to the UK for those seeking sanctuary. The language of “Othering” has now become a main pillar of the current government’s rhetoric when discussing any form of immigration. Tabitha Baker, a researcher at Bournemouth University, has pointed out the dangers inherent in the use of the “us and them” terminology which leads to an over-simplification of the structure of our whole society, for example during the period preceding the Brexit referendum by “simplifying complexities into digestible ideas that appear to be cohesive and assumed to be accurate”. Ultimately, the term “migrant” can come to become synonymous with “any unwanted person”, including other vulnerable groups and minorities, who can be de-valued in the same way.⁷

⁴<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/argentine-torture-exposed-gqwr7fwmh3f>

⁵<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-12-14-me-3085-story.html>

⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/may/08/iraq.iraq>

⁷<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/08/19/the-othering-of-migrants-has-negative-consequences-for-society-at-large/>

Who belongs – and who doesn't?

The great Black American writer Toni Morrison wrote that people acquire respectability through the creation of an "Other". In creating and maintaining "Otherness" we deny people their personhood and individuality. They become a mass – "the Others" – while we insist that we ourselves are individuals.

Toni Morrison is of course focusing on race and racial divisions in the USA. But her ideas are relevant in other societies, for example in analysis of South African apartheid, the Nazis' treatment of Jews and Roma, the attitudes to indigenous people in the Americas and Australia. Here in the UK we have, for generations, "othered" migrants coming to our shores seeking safety. The dominant group (not necessarily the largest numerically) decides who qualifies as a fully-fledged member of society and who doesn't, and acts accordingly. There is a subconscious fear that the "Others" pose some kind of threat, and even if they don't, this fear can be created to consolidate the power of the ruling elite. The attributes of the "Other" can refer to skin colour, language, religion, or lifestyle.

In recent years, we have become familiar with the concept of "dog whistles", i.e. people can refer to "Others" in a coded way which is well understood. For example, when the Nazis used the term "vaterlandslose Gesellen" ("unpatriotic bunch") or "internationalists", they clearly meant Jewish people. These "dog whistle" phrases might sound innocuous, but they drip into our consciousness without our being aware of it, and we might even find ourself using them. For example, the term "inner city" is shorthand for an area with socio-economic problems and high levels of criminality.

How can we respond to Othering?

First of all, we have to be aware and be prepared to challenge it. For example, if every Quaker spoke out every time somebody used the term "illegal immigrant" instead of "asylum seeker", this would at least go a little way to changing how refugees are perceived by the general public. We can applaud the historians who are challenging the accepted myths of our official history and who are doing what historians are meant to do; as David Olusoga said, "History doesn't exist to make us feel good, special, exceptional or magical. History is just history. It is not there as a place of greater safety."⁸

Many of us have been shocked by the physical walls being built all over the world to keep people out; but how many of us are equally shocked by the dehumanising language used when the government talks about "processing" people, rather than their cases? To what extent are we unconsciously absorbing attitudes which dehumanise those who are different from ourselves?

John A. Powell of Berkeley University has told us that the opposite of "Othering" is not "Saming" – it is "Belonging"; and that "belonging does not insist that we are all the same. It means we recognise and celebrate our differences, in a society where 'we the people' includes 'all the people'".⁹

Our challenge therefore is not only to look at the "end-product" (the torture) but also at the roots, and to start healing at the roots.

⁸<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/jun/07/david-olusoga-race-reality-historian-black-britishness>

⁹<https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/nov/08/us-vs-them-the-sinister-techniques-of-othering-and-how-to-avoid-them>

Points for Discussion

Usually, at the end of a Q-CAT Briefing, we encourage Friends to speak truth to power by contacting politicians and diplomats. This time, however, we would like to ask you to think about what you have just read, and your experience of 'othering', possibly using the following questions as the basis for a discussion or reflection:

- Have you ever been aware of a friend/ member of your family 'othering' another person? If so, did you agree with them at those times? Or did you find yourself thinking otherwise? Either way, how did that make you feel?
- Have you had times when you were 'othered'? How did that feel to you?
- Are you aware of times when you have 'othered' people? Do you have any idea what triggers that? Does it help you in some way?
- How do you react to the suggestion that any of us could be groomed to be a torturer?

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The next Newsletter is planned for March 2022

The next Briefing is planned for mid-April 2022

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