


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The plasma of violence: Towards a preventive medicine for political evil

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Abstract

How do people know how – very practically speaking – to be violent? This article explores that question through a Science and Technology Studies perspective. It does so in order to go beyond the usual location of global political violence at a structural level that attributes its emergence principally to hierarchical orders, formal training, or deep cultural, political, or ideological factors. The alternative explanation offered here draws on Bruno Latour’s concept of ‘plasma’ to sketch a theory of how practices of violence are embedded at a distributed ontological level through the historical accumulation of (popular) cultural, textual, technological, and other epistemic objects. In making that claim, I seek to stress how violent knowledge circulates outside the formal domains associated with it (the military, police) and is instead preconsciously accessible to each and every person. To support this argument, the article draws on empirical examples of the use of torture, including interviews conducted with Syrian perpetrators of torture, as well as by tracing the paradoxical entanglements between scientific practice and the practice of torture. I conclude by engaging the field of preventive medicine to speculate on the need to develop modes of violence prevention that appreciate political violence as a population-level sociopolitical problem.

Keywords: Political Violence; Violence Prevention; Science and Technology Studies; Torture; Popular Culture; Ethnography

Introduction

In September 2003, British soldiers occupying the Iraqi city of Basra detained a local hotel receptionist named Baha Mousa. Mousa was immediately subjected to a practice known as conditioning, which denotes the hooding, isolating, placing into stress positions, and beating of prisoners. Two days later, Mousa died.¹ A public inquiry followed to ascertain ‘where responsibility lay for approving the practice of conditioning detainees.’² But despite reviewing the entirety of the British Army’s counterinsurgency training regime, the inquiry failed to locate not only where responsibility lay for approving the practice but also its very origins. Instead, the inquiry cited a collective lack of thought about the violent practices being enacted in Iraq. Consider the testimony of Jorge Mendonça, one officer implicated in Mousa’s death:

‘Stress positions’ was a term much discussed *after* the death of Baha Mousa, *not before*. Prior to his death, my understanding of stress positions was that this was a catch-all expression that could mean anything from leaning a person against a wall, standing on his toes with only his fingertips touching the wall – *as seen in some films* – to making a person kneel with his hands on his head. The term ‘stress position’ is so loose because *it is not a recognised practice*,

¹For a full account of Mousa’s killing, see A. T. Williams, *A Very British Killing* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2013).

²William Gage, *The Baha Mousa Public Inquiry Report* (London, UK: House of Commons, 2011), p. 1.

but one which most soldiers have heard of, *via various routes*. In my case, *I did not consider 'stress positions' prior to the death of Baha Mousa* but did understand the need to prevent a potential terrorist from relaxing before he was questioned ... I gave *no instructions* ... [And] I was *never asked to give an opinion and my advice or guidance was never sought*.³

Faced with claims like these, the usual societal and social scientific response has been to infer duplicity. It is assumed awareness of practices like conditioning is widespread and that those in power are negligent in preventing their enactment and/or holding those responsible to account. In short, we often suspect people of lying. And for good reason. Such lies are extensively documented.⁴ Military and political leaders have long made false declarations of ignorance while well planned and hierarchically ordered war crimes occur.

Without denying those realities, this article takes a step back to consider both a narrower and a broader explanation for the ways in which war crimes and human rights violations emerge. More narrowly, I take seriously the claims of men like Mendonça that practices like conditioning were *not* approved by the military and that they did *not* originate therein. Simply, I ask: *what if they are not lying?* More broadly, I then ask if those practices can instead be located at a globally distributed – culturally, materially, and societally embedded – ontological level that perpetuates the conditions of possibility for political violence irrelevant any individual or political choice. Each of these moves follows a tradition in the study of political violence that secularises our understanding of its emergence at both a structural (violence is not a consequence of human nature, divine will, etc.) and individual level (only rarely are mass atrocities the result of rational-reflexive decision making on behalf of leaders or specific perpetrators).⁵ Within this school of thought, the distributed banality of evil is well recognised as one dark side of modernity: violence flows like a viscous plasma around world politics.

Building on those insights, this article seeks to radically *generalise* accounts of the banality of evil to argue that a spatio-temporally distributed plasma of violent potentiality is accessible to *any person* and irrelevant their attachment to institutions associated with violence. The plasma of violence engulfs even you, the reader, and me, the author, of this essay. To do so, I sketch a theory of where the *practical* knowledge of 'how-to' carry out acts of aberrant violence is located by exploring the 'various routes' described by Mendonça as at the core of how human beings come to know about and enact practices like conditioning. Therein, I trace how practices of violence are entangled with a host of what are usually thought of as functionally differentiated sites of knowledge. I focus especially strongly on demonstrating how the domain of popular culture, which would seem formally and practically distant from the professionalised worlds of security and warfighting, nonetheless directly affects its conditions of possibility. Notably, I do not refer here to the claim that cultural artefacts *discursively* augment the likelihood of violence by, for example, enabling the dehumanisation of groups or valourising masculine ideals of warfighting.⁶ Instead, I suggest such artefacts transmit knowledge of specific – often technical – practices of 'how to' commit violence. Put differently, I explore how popular cultural and other objects instruct us in the knowledge necessary to act violently: drilling its scripts into society globally. The central thesis that follows is that there exists a globally distributed ecology of violent

³Ibid., p. 384, emphasis added.

⁴For discussions, see Martha Huggins, Mika Haritos-Fatouros, and Phillip G. Zimbardo, *Violence Workers* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Ruth Blakeley, 'Still training to torture? US training of military forces from Latin America', *Third World Quarterly*, 27:8 (2006); Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2012).

⁵Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1963); Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2005).

⁶Manni Crone, 'Carnal spectatorship and dissonant masculinities in Islamic state videos', *International Affairs*, 96:3 (2020); Megan MacKenzie, 'Why do soldiers swap illicit pictures?', *Security Dialogue*, 51:4 (2020); Andreas Behnke, 'The re-enchantment of war in popular culture', *Millennium*, 34:3 (2006).

knowledge – what this article comes to term a certain ‘plasma’ of violence – that must be better understood if we are to work towards reducing the prevalence of war, conflict, and suffering.

To get there, I draw on Science and Technology Studies (STS) informed tools of inquiry. These relational approaches map the material-semiotic networks, assemblages, or ecologies that enable phenomena, but do so without relying on the presence of hierarchical forms of ordering (that is, decisionism) or rational-reflexive decision-making (that is, that the soldiers who killed Baha Mousa decided to do so) to explain events. Moreover, these theories do not view social fields as hermetically sealed and so allow us to take an ontologically distributed view of phenomena. However, while these perspectives have previously been deployed to study political violence, the focus has remained on tracing the sociotechnical networks that are ‘functionally-associated’ with violence (for example, the military) or on the material-technological and infrastructural components of those networks.⁷ This focus often implies a form of institutional and sociotechnological determinism that risks naturalising the military-industrial complex as an all-powerful entity whose tendrils are deeply socially and materially embedded. By contrast, the radical generality within which this article situates its plasma of violence aims to multiply the sites of analytical, political, and practical relevance for its understanding. Indeed, the trajectory of this article is ultimately geared towards asking what might be done to combat political violence. This remains a sticking point. Though many have long seen voluntarist understandings of the emergence of violence as unsatisfactory, and so embraced one or another conceptualisation of political evil as an ontologically distributed phenomena, translating that view into concrete proposals for violence prevention has been exceedingly difficult. Against this, my argument will eventually suggest that seeing violence in these terms can radically extend the potential means by which we might prevent its emergence.

Throughout what follows, I stress my ontologically generalised view of the distributed nature of political violence with a twist. Rather than focusing solely on agents like Baha Mousa’s assailants, I show how the plasma of violence does not only draw resources from seemingly distant domains (namely popular culture) but also injects itself and its dynamics into other fields in ways that spreads violence beyond its assumed limits. Specifically, I focus on how the (social) scientific field can be infiltrated by this plasma of violence, following the frequent parallels that STS has made between elements of scientific practice and acts of torture, violence, or ‘detective’ inquiry.⁸ Those parallels are usually drawn to affirm that the practice of producing scientific truths is reliant not only on the objectivity of the scientific method but also on the practical entanglement of science with social institutions, authority, credibility, and norms. In my discussion, I take that argument a step further and argue that purportedly objective scientific studies of violence also often find themselves uncomfortably close to drawing on the same distributed plasma of violent knowledge as professionals in violence. The claim is not that there is no distinction between science and violence but that this analogy reveals the alarming scope to which violence is ‘ecologically’ distributed at very mundane, practical, levels.

I now proceed in five stages. First, I draw on Isabelle Stengers’s comparison between social scientific and policing methods of inquiry, as well as Manuel de Landa’s work on the complex dynamics of warfare, to stress the need to understand cases like that of the death of Baha Mousa beyond either rationalist views that see violence as a consequence of instrumentalist script-following and/or interpretivist perspectives that focus on meta-discursive drivers (for example, ideology, masculinity, etc.). In doing so, I argue that the emergence of political violence can

⁷See, for examples, Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘Torture and the material-semiotic networks of violence across borders’, *International Political Sociology*, 10:1 (2016); Jairus Grove, ‘An insurgency of things’, *International Political Sociology*, 10:4 (2016); Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘The departed militant: A portrait of joy, violence and political evil’, *Security Dialogue*, 51:6 (2020).

⁸See, among others, Isabelle Stengers, *Power and Invention* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Bruno Latour, ‘How to talk about the body? The normative dimension of science studies’, *Body & Society*, 10 (2004); Vinciane Despret, ‘Thinking like a rat’, *Angelaki*, 20:2 (2015).

be better understood as relying on an abductive logic of practical action. Second, I argue that those abductive logics lead to the import of practices like conditioning from seemingly distant social domains, such as popular culture. To do so, I explore the example of the Stanford Prison Experiment to show how such practical transmission of knowledge works beyond formal domains of violence, before returning to Baha Mousa's death. Third, I frame my discussion theoretically by expanding on Bruno Latour's concept of plasma, which he uses to describe how objects that do not *seem* relationally entangled with a field of practice can suddenly become so. Fourth, I empirically ground my argument within a series of interviews I have conducted with Syrian perpetrators of torture. During those conversations, similar dynamics to those explored earlier in this article were described by perpetrators in ways that also led to an important personal realisation *vis-à-vis* the degree of my own entanglement with the plasma of violence as a social scientist.

Finally, the article concludes by dwelling on both the generalisability and ethicopolitical implications of its claims. While the empirical scope of this paper is somewhat limited by its focus on the practice of torture, I argue that the claims it makes about that specific practice can be transposed to both distinct forms of political violence and the dynamics of social life more generally. After doing so, I then turn to the ethicopolitical implications of this argument. If violent knowledge and practices are indeed sociotechnically distributed globally in the manner I describe, serious questions as to how its circulation and effects can be disrupted naturally present themselves. Speculatively, I thus move towards proposing social science and practitioners might learn from the again seemingly distinct field of preventive medicine in order to rethink violence prevention efforts in distributed terms. This involves considering political violence as a 'population level' problem that we must come to recognise *all* persons being entangled-with to greater or lesser degrees.

Anything to declare? Abduction, science, and violence

Mendonça claims 'no instructions' were given to deploy the practice of conditioning. But by what other means might it have emerged? The most common answer is to focus on cultural-discursive explanations that locate violence in the historical development of normative ideologies for its justification, normalisation, and propagation.⁹ This includes, for example, a focus on the way heteronormative understandings of masculinity have legitimated the use of violence across society, something often linked to global militarism.¹⁰ Equally, understandings of racial superiority can be closely connected to both past colonial violence and modern counterinsurgency doctrines.¹¹ Such explanations move us away from understandings of violence as purely instrumental or theories that see human nature as predisposed to violence. However, these theories are most suited to explaining background conditions of possibility for violence, rather than explaining the use of specific types of violence (key exceptions aside)¹² such as conditioning. For example, it is clear that the soldiers who killed Baha Mousa need not have deployed conditioning to do so. Why – then – did they?

To reach an explanation, allow me to first make a slight theoretical detour by way of Isabelle Stengers's discussion of a core methodological difficulty at the heart of STS-based approaches to

⁹Laura Sjöberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2007); Carol Burke, *Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-and-Tight* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004); J. Marshall Beier, 'Pathologizing sub-juncthods', *International Political Sociology*, 8 (2014).

¹⁰Anna Stavrianakis and Maria Stern, 'Militarism and security', *Security Dialogue*, 49:1–2 (2018).

¹¹Jasmine Gani, 'Racial militarism and civilizational anxiety at the imperial encounter', *Security Dialogue*, 52:6 (2021).

¹²For example, work within feminist IR convincingly connects practices of sexual violence to patriarchal, masculine, and heteronormative discourses. See Paul Kirby, 'How is rape a weapon of war? Feminist International Relations, modes of critical explanation and the study of sexual violence', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:4 (2013); Paula Drummond, Elizabeth Mesok, and Marysia Zalewski, 'Sexual violence in the wrong(ed) bodies', *International Affairs*, 96:5 (2020).

exploring social life. Translating the philosophical works of Alfred North Whitehead into French, Stengers reports grappling with the lack of an equivalent term to the English verb *to disclose* that is central to his *œuvre*.¹³ In order to affirm Whitehead's positionality within the Anglo-Saxon empiricist tradition, she eventually settles on *déclarer* because 'it can be placed in communication with a situation that has nothing phenomenological about it: when a customs officer asks a traveler, "Have you anything to declare?"'¹⁴ As she continues:

The officer would be surprised if, in response to his question, the traveler began to spout an interminable list of everything he might be liable to declare ... To declare, here, refers [then] to a specialized situation, stable enough for any deviation to be surprising ... The customs officer discerns – that's his job – the traveler *qua* potential bearer of merchandise liable to be taxed, but he also knows, when he asks his question, that the declaration he anticipates does not define the traveler.¹⁵

Stengers uses this example – in which a moment of sensory examination by an observer of another is recognised as non-defining – to grasp at one of the central characteristics of the pragmatist philosophies that undergird STS. The object of the customs officer's study is a traveller who possesses an 'interminable list of things related to her subjectivity but very few of which are *initially* visible to empirical inquiry. It is important to note here that the problem is not that such things are beyond everyday reality, hidden at a different ontological level (structural, natural, etc.), but simply that they 'go without saying'.¹⁶ This means that many things about our lives are both too banal or quotidian to mention and that in many cases human beings act in the world un- or pre-consciously: the majority of our actions are carried out thoughtlessly. By way of example, the soldiers observed by the Baha Mousa inquiry are figures who – based upon their training, testimony, and service records – are entirely 'Geneva Convention Compliant' (in the favoured term of the British Army) but who nonetheless possesses knowledge of 'non-recognised' practices (conditioning, stress positions, etc.) about which they themselves 'did not consider'. The potential for soldiers to embody political evil seemed to somehow go 'undeclared' even to those very same soldiers.

The problem posed by these scenarios is one of method. How do we get someone or something to fully declare itself and what it might be capable of? How do we study Mendonça's 'various routes' towards violence if they are only unconsciously perceptible? Following a long tradition in STS, Stengers's solution is developed by drawing parallels between social agents who serve a 'policing' role and that of the scientist observing a phenomenon.¹⁷ The intuition here is that scientific inquiry and the police order¹⁸ of society face a cognitively or analytically – *if not normatively* – similar task: getting an object to reveal information about itself, beyond that which it willingly shares or can articulate. A physicist seeks to understand the secrets of dark matter, which cannot explain its own dynamics. An interrogator seeks to understand why somebody killed someone, but that person is withholding information, is unsure of their own motivation, or may indeed be innocent (our initial suspicion or hypothesis thus being incorrect). Stengers suggests that in each case this is achieved not inductively or deductively but abductively. The customs officer asks questions but also 'engage[s] others modes of discernment' including – for example – making judgements about possible guilt by observing 'his "facies" – the fact that he did not look Caucasian enough – or his bearing'.¹⁹ Indeed, it is clear from studies

¹³Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 46.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷See fn. 8.

¹⁸Jacques Ranciere, 'From politics to aesthetics', *Paragraph*, 28:1 (2005).

¹⁹Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead*, p. 47.

of the police²⁰ that most judgements made by individuals of this kind are not deductive or inductive but based on a ‘guess, inference, blindsight’ that is ‘unconscious’.²¹ Police officers make judgements based on the face of an individual, their skin colour, or their bearing without reflexive thought.

Stengers’s understanding of abduction is based on that of Charles Sanders Peirce, which predates a more recent social scientific focus on instinctive, preconscious, ‘Systems-1’, habitual, etc. action.²² Peirce argued that ‘perceptual judgment results from a pre-conscious process that ... is beyond conscious control.’²³ Demonstrating this, he also deployed the metaphor of the police detective, and his amateur forays into that field by way of the example of the theft of his watch while travelling on a coastal steamer to New York. On discovering this theft, Peirce recalls asking the captain to assemble his crew on deck, and describes what followed:

I went from one end of the row to the other, and talked a little to each one, in as *dégagé* a manner as I could, about whatever he could talk about with interest ... hoping that I could be able to detect some symptom of his being a thief. When I had gone through the row, I ... said to myself, ‘Not the least scintilla of light have I got to go upon.’ But thereupon my other self ... said to me, ‘But you simply must put your finger on the man. No matter if you have no reason, you must say whom you will think to be the thief.’ I made a little loop in my walk, which had not taken a minute, and as I turned toward them, all shadow of doubt had vanished.²⁴

Peirce then accuses a man of the theft in this apparently random manner who – yes – turns out to be the thief. For Peirce, abduction is precisely about this kind of ‘intelligent guessing’.²⁵ Such intelligent guesses are linked to colloquial understandings of detective-type inquiries in which we combine multiple little clues in order to guess who might be behind a particular crime, drawing on a kind of combinatorial hermeneutics.²⁶ Perhaps Peirce had noticed the man he accused earlier in his voyage and subconsciously found something about him to be suspicious, later prompting the abduction of his guilt. In any case, what’s important here for our purposes is both Stengers’s and Peirce’s image of the police officer or the detective. As Reichertz describes, abductive reasoning tends to emerge when one is forced – by the pressures of work, circumstances, or simple cognitive economy – to do *something*: ‘you simply must put your finger on the man.’²⁷ Detectives must make decisions, else the crime will go on. In this light, it is worth reconsidering Mendonça’s words that:

*I did not consider ‘stress positions’ prior to the death of Baha Mousa but did understand the need to prevent a potential terrorist from relaxing before he was questioned.*²⁸

Mendonça’s latter words hint at what is colloquially known as the ticking time bomb scenario, which is a (largely fictional) situation likely to evoke abductive modes of reasoning to avoid catastrophe. More generally, the sociotechnics of violence are intrinsically suited to abduction for

²⁰Harvey Sacks, ‘Notes on police assesment of moral character’, in David Sudnow (ed.), *Studies in Social Interaction* (Florence, MA: The Free Press, 1972).

²¹R. G. Burton, ‘The problem of control in abduction’, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 36:1 (2000), p. 149.

²²Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘Towards an international political ergonomics’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:4 (2019).

²³Burton, ‘The problem of control in abduction’, p. 151.

²⁴Charles Sanders Peirce, ‘Guessing’, *Hound and Horn*, 2 (1929), p. 271.

²⁵Alena Drieschova, ‘Peirce’s semeiotics’, *International Theory*, 9:1 (2017).

²⁶Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘A parasitic critique for International Relations’, *International Political Sociology*, 13:2 (2019).

²⁷Jo Reichertz, ‘Abduction: The logic of discovery of grounded theory’, *Sozialforschung*, 11:1 (2010).

²⁸Gage, *The Baha Mousa Public Inquiry Report*, p. 384.

several reasons. First, combat environments are highly indeterminate and in flux *vis-à-vis* the routines of everyday life and produce affective conditions (stress, fatigue, etc.) that both demand something be done *and* reduce the capacity to rationally-reflexively deliberate over what precisely to do.²⁹ Second, due to this indeterminacy, the actions that soldiers are expected to carry out cannot be fitted deductively into rule-governed schemas, more so than in most settings. For example, military training regimes draw on ‘operant conditioning’ in which soldiers are trained to carry out actions automatically and thoughtlessly via continuous drilling.³⁰ However, those actions are limited to mechanical processes (that is, firing a gun) that can be instilled into muscle memory, whereas the power to make more substantive on the ground decisions has gradually been autonomously delegated to soldiers themselves given the indeterminate ‘density of possible states of modern war’.³¹ With Manuel De Landa, in contemporary warfare:

The commanding officer establishes goals to be achieved, and leaves it up to the tactical units to implement the means to achieve those goals. By lowering the decision-making thresholds (by granting local responsibility), each part of the war machine has to deal with a small amount of uncertainty instead of letting it concentrate at the top. By creating an island of stability in the middle of a war, one disperses uncertainty all along the chain of command.³²

This ‘dispersion of uncertainty’, coupled with destabilising affective conditions, creates circumstances in which abductive modes of practical inference are likely to come into play given that repertoires of actions to deal with that uncertainty cannot be trained for except in the abstract. Notably – however – the kinds of abductions likely to emerge here are distinct from those of the police. While studies of the police indeed show their capacity to make judgements non-reflexively, it is also shown how many of those judgements are trained for in different ways. This includes both formal training and cultural-discursive biases towards, for example, being especially suspicious of those who are racially or otherwise different from hegemonic social norms. In the context of warfare, similar cultural-discursive biases will be present, but given the goal of warfare is fundamentally to injure this does not necessarily translate into specific practical instructions for action that would explain the emergence of – say – torture. Indeed, Darius Rejali has noted that ‘there is little evidence of top-down systematic training in specific techniques in the history of modern torture.’³³ As such, while a conceptualisation of abductive modes of human practice gets us a little closer to understanding how ‘non-recognised’ practices of violence can emerge, we are not quite there yet. We are still no closer to working out why Baha Mousa was killed using the technique known as conditioning, specifically, and so to identifying *where* knowledge of these ‘unrecognised’ practices emerges from precisely.

The Hollywood Syndrome

Unpacking Mendonça’s brief aside that ‘conditioning’ was something ‘seen in some films’ is where we now turn. This ‘route’ by which violent knowledge is circulated is something militaries have long known about. For example, the HUMINT (Human Intelligence) training regimes used to educate Baha Mousa’s assailants include warnings across PowerPoint slides against copying ‘what you have seen in the movies’ or television, something named the Hollywood Syndrome (Figure 1). A few slides later, we are thus presented with a scene from the film *GI Jane* used to depict what *not* to do to prisoners. Especially interesting is that instructions *against* using

²⁹Dave Grossman, *On Killing* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 1996).

³⁰William McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

³¹Manuel De Landa, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1991), p. 60.

³²De Landa, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*, p. 61.

³³Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 11.

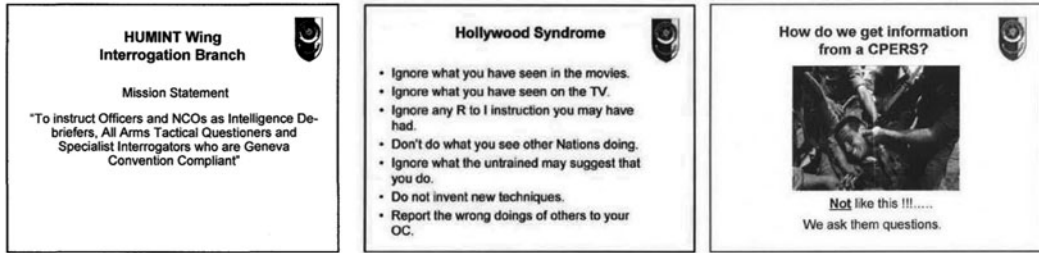


Figure 1. The British Army's depiction of the Hollywood Syndrome (CPERS = Captured Person).

Source: Publicly accessible via the Baha Mousy inquiry archives, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2tyy25bx>.

filmic references as a guide to violence did not prevent this from occurring. Nonetheless, does this syndrome emerge solely because soldiers are individuals who – logically enough – are trained to kill and so are particularly attracted to these cultural references? This, again, is often the intuition. A combination of the permissibility of violence within the military coupled with an ideological culture (namely their patriarchal and racialised underpinnings) is typically seen as central to these syndromes.

To see how we can also look at this differently, it is worth noting that the similar methodological reliance on abduction across detective and scientific praxis, sketched above, can sometimes be read as more than an analogy. Famously, Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment purported to demonstrate the potential of normal people to act badly in particular situations.³⁴ It did so by taking a group of university students, half of whom acted as guards in a mock prison, with the other half acting as prisoners. The scientists then observed the former violently abusing the latter. Zimbardo claimed the experiment proved the greater validity of situationism over trait theory for understanding human behaviour. For some time, however, the experiment has been extensively criticised for the presence of overwhelming demand characteristics in which Zimbardo appeared to script the behaviour of his subjects by (inadvertently) telling them how to behave.³⁵ But I bring up the Stanford Prison Experiment here not to focus on the validity of the claims it made about its experimental subjects or humanity at large. Instead, it is the methodological and ethical flaws in its design and *what they tell us about Zimbardo himself* that interest me. Specifically, my view is that the critique that the design of the Stanford Prison Experiment involved scripting the behaviour of participants through the introduction of demand characteristics begs an important but unaddressed question: how did Zimbardo know how to script prison abuse? Where did that knowledge come from? How did *he* become a torturer?

To reach an answer, we are gifted with a digitised archive of Zimbardo's experiment, including photographs, videos, and audio recordings of the minutiae of its enactment, as well as his own memoir of how the experiment was constructed.³⁶ In photographs of the experiment, we see scientists in laboratory coats putting together plywood walls, camera equipment being set up, a meeting room for planning, and so on. These efforts represent a very thick performance of a field of knowledge to which the scientists in lab coats have access. The intricacy of that performance would seem to require one possess an idea of the material, symbolic, and practical contours of that situation. Its basic descriptor – prison – is relatively empty as a signifier for action. Reading his account closely, we find that Zimbardo's knowledge of prison life was not derived from any expertise he might have on the subject. Instead, the experiment was structured via

³⁴ Phillip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007).

³⁵ A. Banuazizi and S. Movahedi, 'Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison', *American Psychologist*, 30 (1975).

³⁶ See: <https://tinyurl.com/yxvtqrmx> accessed 4 April 2022.

Zimbardo's own abduction of violent knowledge, likely in part because his account reveals the unplanned haste with which the experiment was designed.³⁷ When describing mock arrests carried out before subjects were transported to their makeshift prison, Zimbardo notes how the arrests 'like everything else they will be experiencing, should merge reality and illusion, role-playing and identity' before recalling how a colleague prepared to 'start the siren on his all-white squad car' by putting 'on his silver reflecting sunglasses, the kind the guard wore in the movie *Cool Hand Luke*, the kind that prevents anyone from seeing your eyes'.³⁸ Later, Zimbardo admits that he:

Borrowed the idea that the guards and staff should wear silver reflecting sunglasses ... [from] the classic southern prison movie *Cool Hand Luke* ... Tonight Guard Hellmann would improvise a script that might rival the best that the scriptwriter could have created in shaping the nature of prison authority.³⁹

Here, the structure of scientific experimentation is not relying on, say, a period of ethnographic inquiry into prison life proper but on Hollywood visual inscriptions. Thus, the experimental prison included a solitary confinement area – a cupboard – directly mirroring the 'punishment box' found in *Cool Hand Luke*.⁴⁰ It is hardly surprising that Zimbardo described feeling 'as though we were on a bizarre movie set'.⁴¹ By constructing the experiment as a movie set, Zimbardo demanded his subjects act as if they were in a movie, and they complied. Paradoxically, however, Zimbardo only directly acknowledges the influence of popular culture on the subjects of his experiment, not on his own construction of it:

Dramatic visual images of the enemy on posters, television, magazine covers, movies, and the Internet imprint on the recesses of the limbic system, the primitive brain ... powerful emotions of fear and hate.⁴²

For Zimbardo, popular culture can lead to dehumanising behaviours through emotional effects. This is the basic and very controversial idea that movies, video games, etc. desensitise us to violence, a claim for which the evidence is in fact ambiguous.⁴³ In more sophisticated terms, theorists of popular culture within world politics have increasingly stressed that such artefacts should not be viewed solely as representational 'mirrors' to politics but as co-constitutive of its dynamics.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, this literature tends to remain constituted by 'sophisticated readings of what various representations *mean*' with less focus on how 'those representations are ... interpreted by audiences who engage with them'.⁴⁵ Moreover, where such a focus on audiences is evident, it tends to remain at the discursive level, with the idea – for example – that 'synthetic experiences' might change the beliefs of audiences in ways that have serious political consequences.⁴⁶ What is far less explored is how popular culture might inform our corporeal, quotidian, and unthought practices.

³⁷Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, pp. 26–9.

³⁸Ibid., p. 33.

³⁹Ibid., p. 128.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 216.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 101.

⁴²Ibid., p. 11.

⁴³Karen E. Dill and Jody C. Dill, 'Video game violence', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 3:4 (1998).

⁴⁴Anni Kangas, 'From interface to interpretants', *Millennium*, 38:2 (2009); Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, 'Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture: World politics continuum', *Politics*, 29:3 (2009).

⁴⁵Rhys Crilley, 'Where we at? New directions for research on popular culture and world politics', *International Studies Review*, 23:1 (2021), p. 172.

⁴⁶J. Furman Daniel and Paul Musgrave, 'Synthetic experiences: How popular culture matters for images of international relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 61:3 (2017).

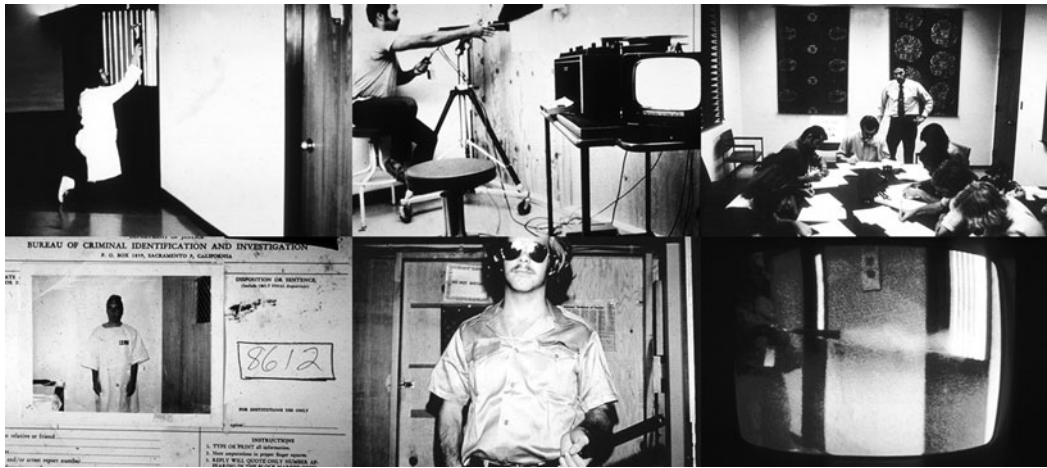


Figure 2. The construction of the Stanford Prison Experiment.
 Source: CC BY-SA 4.0, original author Philip Zimbardo.

This is somewhat surprising given there is an obvious observation one can make about the Hollywood Syndrome. Let's refer back to the British Army's PowerPoint slides (Figure 1). These slides are not especially concerned about films or video games producing aggression through the meanings they semiotically communicate. Instead, they demand soldiers 'ignore what you have *seen*.' The worry is about a transfer of practices – that is, actual scripts for how to behave, for how to move your body – that are unauthorised. At a moment of abductive necessity, in which an affective-emotional demand to act is in play, these inscriptions may provide peripheral 'instructions' on what to do. They may fill in the gaps that the 'dispersed uncertainty' of modern warfare produces. An analogy might help. If it were possible to freely download schematics of how to produce a nuclear weapon, and somebody then produced a weapon, few would question those schematics as being a key reason that this event occurred. The same – the examples I'm glossing suggest – might be true *vis-à-vis* rather more basic (violent) practices, which also appear to sometimes infiltrate social fields outside the formal arenas of violence, including science. As such, while we cannot take the Stanford Prison Experiment itself as a model for understanding how human beings become violent, we can take Zimbardo himself as an image of where torture knowledge sometimes emanates from (Figure 2).

To be clear, my point is not that it is irrelevant that practices like conditioning emerged within the military, whose institutional foundations and provision of training are clearly crucial underlying conditions of possibility for the emergence of practices like conditioning. Doubly so when such institutions appear to provide permissible conditions for 'non-recognised' practices to emerge. Instead, my focus is upon where the knowledge of particular violent practices can be located, ontologically. Zimbardo's case demonstrates how that knowledge is located *beyond* those institutions, at least in part. Moreover, it is notable that examples of scientific malpractice also display institutional affinities to that of the military. For example, reflecting on the use that Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret make of the example of Stanley Milgram's own and equally controversial experiment on obedience to authority, Bruno Latour writes:

Only in the name of science is Stanley Milgram's experiment possible ... In any other situation, the students would have punched Milgram in the face ... thus displaying a very sturdy and widely understood disobedience to authority. That students obeyed Milgram's torture

does not prove they harbored some built-in tendency to violence, but demonstrates only the capacity of scientists to produce artefacts no other authority can manage to obtain.⁴⁷

Latour's claim here is exaggerated, as clearly it is not 'only in the name of science' that such events can occur. However, his broader point is that science possesses a social authority that can be coercive in its capacity to persuade others to act as might be desired, echoing to some small degree the importance of military authority in generating acquiescence from soldiers and society.⁴⁸ It is then this combination of institutional authority, a setting of uncertainty that ushers in modes of abductive reasoning, and the presence of a host of artefacts (popular cultural or not, see below) that I am suggesting is crucial to the emergence of these non-recognised practices. Beyond all this, there is one final reason that I have chosen to use *Zimbardo* to explore these dynamics. Following the revelations of CIA-led torture during the war on terror, the American Psychological Association (APA) commissioned a report to investigate the involvement of professional psychologists in that interrogation programme. *Zimbardo's* name is mentioned 89 times in that report, largely in reference to the Stanford Prison Experiment and its findings.⁴⁹ But *Zimbardo* is also known to have given at least one in-person talk to 'a small group at the CIA.'⁵⁰ We can only speculate on the extent of the influence of his work but it is not impossible to imagine that his early *Cool Hand Luke*-derived knowledge of how to construct an environment in which torture became permissible eventually had effects on its real-world use. Simply: sometimes the practice of science and torture get uncomfortably close.

The plasma of violence

By this point, I have drawn a line connecting the practice of science and violence that suggests the two sometimes draw on the same abductive mode of inference that connects knowledge from domains seemingly distant from violence to its conditions of practical possibility. I will now attempt to theorise this phenomenon in more depth, while stressing its significance for the study of global forms of violence. To begin, it is worth exploring a problem with the analysis above. As I hope to have shown, STS-based sociotechnical perspectives allow us to understand the ways in which social fields are not hermetically sealed but – on the contrary – intertwined through hybrid networks of connection. In this view, there can be no pure military, scientific, or other social sphere. However, the difficulty is that this relational view has too often been captured through ontological metaphors such as the network, ecology, or assemblage that appear to define an actor *entirely* relationally. The problem with this view is that it would seem not to allow for change to emerge. If we are defined by our relations with other human beings, material objects, technological networks, etc., then why would we – or anything else – ever change? We would be *preformatted* in a particular way, *preconstituted* by our relations.⁵¹ As Graham Harman writes, 'if a given actor were entirely identifiable with its actions, there would be no way for it ever to engage in new actions.'⁵² Because STS-based approaches characteristically deny any essence exists at the 'heart of any entity' (whether human nature, rational-reflexive autonomy, etc.), and instead define life through relational entanglements, there's a risk that 'no principle of change' can be identified in 'the cosmos, though change is indeed what we see'.⁵³

⁴⁷Latour, 'How to talk about the body?', p. 222.

⁴⁸Claudia Aradau and Jef Huysmans, 'Assembling credibility', *Security Dialogue*, 50:1 (2019).

⁴⁹Sidley Austin LLP, *Report to the Special Committee of the Board of Directors of the American Psychological Association* (Sidley Austin LLP, 2015).

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵¹Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne, Aus.: Re.press, 2009).

⁵²Graham Harman, 'Entanglement and relation', *New Literary History*, 45:1 (2014), pp. 41–2.

⁵³*Ibid.*

To put this differently, STS-based approaches⁵⁴ often seem to imply that it is sufficient to map existing relations in a static manner. Indeed, we could imagine deterministically tracing the emergence of conditioning in Iraq down to the fact that several of the involved soldiers had seen ‘some films’ in which the practice was depicted. In that sense, this should be a predictable occurrence: conditioning should be *expected* from within this ontological perspective. It would also imply that simply removing those films from public circulation – demanding an alarming form of censorship – would solve the issue. But the emergence of conditioning was clearly not predictable, given most soldiers did *not* deploy that practice, despite having likely watched the same films. One solution to this dilemma has been provided by Bruno Latour, who has tentatively introduced the concept of ‘plasma’ to explain changes in relational configurations. Latour asks:

Why do fierce armies disappear in a week? Why do whole empires like the Soviet one vanish in a few months? Why do companies who cover the whole world go bankrupt? ... Why is it that quiet citizens turn into revolutionary crowds or that grim mass rallies break down into a joyous crowd of free citizens? ... Generals, editorialists, managers, observers, moralists often say that those sudden changes have a soft, impalpable liquid quality about them. That’s exactly the etymology of plasma.⁵⁵

Plasma, as he continues is:

That which is not yet formatted, not yet measured, not yet socialized, not yet engaged in metrological chains ... How big is it? Take a map of London and imagine that the social world visited so far occupies no more room than the subway. The plasma would be the rest of London, all its buildings, inhabitants, climates, plants, cats ... [So ...] sociologists ... were right to look for ‘something hidden behind’, but it’s neither behind nor especially hidden ... It is not hidden, simply unknown. *It resembles a vast hinterland providing the resources for every single course of action to be fulfilled.*⁵⁶

As such, Latour claims that ‘to every action I have described so far, you have to add an immense repertoire of missing masses ... [There] exists a reserve, a reserve army, an immense territory ... for every formatted, localized, continuous, accountable action to be carried out in.’⁵⁷ Latour does not expand further on this concept of plasma but it appears to grapple with the need to understand how change can be understood within relational sociologies by claiming that ‘unformatted’ (that is, not yet relationally connected) objects can at times be connected to social ecologies in ways that radically change them. In my own view, this concept usefully grasps at what Gil Eyal has elsewhere called the ‘spaces between fields’ across world politics.⁵⁸ Attempting to combine Latour’s sociology with that of Pierre Bourdieu, Eyal describes such a site as ‘a space that is underdetermined, where things can be done and combinations and conversions can be established that are not possible to do within fields.’⁵⁹ These are, put differently, sites of underdetermined potential connection and hybridisation that exist outside existing social networks: Latour’s ‘hinterlands’.

The term plasma gestures at a simple but critical point: because we are embedded in multiple social fields, it is the points at which they unexpectedly meet, for whatever reason, at which novel

⁵⁴This is especially true for Actor-Network Theory-inspired but also extends more widely into STS. For discussions, see Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

⁵⁵Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 244.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁵⁸Gil Eyal, ‘Spaces between fields’, in Phil Gorski (ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu and Historical Analysis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵⁹Eyal, ‘Spaces between fields’, p. 177.

or surprising events occur. Indeed, it is notable that while STS-based approaches do not believe that social fields are hermetically sealed, they increasingly recognise that professional fields – law, politics, the military, etc. – possess some form of consistent internal dynamic, despite their hybrid connections to a multitude of other spheres.⁶⁰ In this sense, the concept of plasma grasps at the ways in which when we *perceive* ourselves to be embedded within a singular sphere, we are nonetheless always drawing on peripheral knowledge from other spheres.⁶¹ Indeed, in the discipline of management studies, the concept of peripheral knowledge and its linking of social fields is posited to lead to innovation.⁶² The claim is that practitioners working in any field draw on information of which they are peripherally aware and, though this term is not used, it is clear that the mode of inference by which those knowledges are imported is abductive. Martin Schulz, for example, argues that the innovative import of peripheral knowledge into problem solving schemas is linked to ‘knowledge flows’, which refers to the multiple streams of knowledge that we are all potentially ‘receiving’ peripherally to a given task.⁶³ This includes ‘outside research, working to solve a problem in an unrelated area, talking with acquaintances in other fields, or reading an article on a topic that is seemingly irrelevant to the assigned task’, or watching a film.⁶⁴ When forced into certain situations (designating a thief, identifying a smuggler, torturing a body, innovating on a new product) these knowledge flows may provide practical instructions on how to act. They may become the genesis of ‘non-recognised’ practices by being the instructions on which abductive modes of inference draw to make sense of a scenario, to locally order it, and – often – act.

Differently put, the place of plasma in our social world is analogous to biological processes of osmosis. Acting in one social context, human cognition is permeable to knowledge from quite different contexts. However, unlike in sociological readings that might associate plasma with ‘structure’, this process of osmosis is contingent, complex, and emergent. Plasma does not designate a fixed or stable structure within a social field, nor solely the fact that we exist across multiple social fields that give us a different perspective on another. Rather, it gestures at the blurry – rhizomatic – spaces in which distinct social worlds (the home, the workplace, our dreams) meet each other and objects with a more-or-less fixed relational role in one world can unexpectedly enter and shift the reality of another. In this, the concept relates to Jef Huysmans’s view that ‘life and matter’ are ‘always in motion’.⁶⁵ While ‘bounded space and enclosed communities’ may exist, human beings (and other actors) are always ‘in motion’ between such spaces and create entanglements across them that constantly modify conditions of possibility for action. This point is important as it removes any deterministic reading of the plasma of violence. Instead, its effects are differentially felt by each and every person and in each and every situation that person may find themselves.

Although this logic is fairly straightforward, the implications it poses for our understanding of violence are quite radical. For reasons that are bracketed in this discussion, cultural, material, and technological artefacts of violence have accumulated across history.⁶⁶ In Latour’s terms, that process of accumulation has generated a ‘reserve, a reserve army, an immense territory’ of violence. Indeed, as I have shown elsewhere, violence is marked by remarkable *practical* temporal repetitions in which practices which were presumed to have been archaic and more-or-less

⁶⁰Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁶¹Martine R. Haas and Wendy Ham, ‘Microfoundations of knowledge recombination’, *Advances in Strategic Management*, 32 (2015).

⁶²A. Hargadon, ‘Brokering knowledge’, *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 24 (2002).

⁶³Martin Schulz, ‘The uncertain relevance of newness’, *The Academy of Management Journal*, 44:4 (2001).

⁶⁴Haas and Ham, ‘Microfoundations of knowledge recombination’.

⁶⁵Jef Huysmans, ‘Motioning the politics of security’, *Security Dialogue*, 53:3 (2022), p. 6.

⁶⁶Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996).

confined to the dustbin of history – beheadings, certain torture techniques, etc. – reappear in late modernity and radically shock our sensibilities.⁶⁷ Those practices appear to be preserved in innumerable little artefacts that might be popular cultural, academic, scientific, cultural, material-technological, or otherwise circulated. This claim is distinct, it is important to stress, from the idea that violence is necessarily discursively-culturally legitimated across society or within human minds. Although that can clearly be the case, my point here is more general: that this plasmatic reserve of violence risks flowing into all domains of life, irrelevant their institutional configuration, if circumstances present themselves appropriately. This view provides an alternative perspective on why social systems that appear peaceable can rapidly morph into something horrific. In this, it also accords with other social theoretical perspectives founded in complexity theorising that have explored the democratisation of evil. However, before I move to concluding with a discussion of what might be done about this status quo, I now wish to turn back to the reality of political violence by suggesting is that it is this plasmatic hinterland populated by Latour's 'missing masses' of the world that sometimes – very literally – disappears bodies from the world.

Seeing things differently

We've ventured into the somewhat abstract. But what does all this mean, for the real world and its politics? To return to that question, I wish to stress that the kernel of the preceding theoretical discussion did not emerge abstractly. Instead, it grew out of my own interactions with violence workers. Since around 2013, I have been engaged in a series of interviews with Syrian perpetrators of torture.⁶⁸ Though I don't have time to dwell on the specifics of those interviews, I want to briefly sketch how the perpetrators I spoke to came to provoke a series of self-realizations within me, the supposed observer of their lives. To go back to, and twist a little, Stengers' discussion of abduction, these encounters generated a series of *self*-declarations that made me think differently about violence. To explain this, I will discuss the following extract of an interview I conducted with a man we'll call Ali. Ali is a former intelligence agent of the Syrian state who – in 2011 – came to repeatedly participate in acts of torture. The extract of our conversation is taken from the point at which I was asking Ali to delineate the contours of a torture technique known as the *falaqa*, which involves the binding together of a victim's feet – often using the strap of a rifle – before they are whipped by a group of perpetrators. We were chatting in a rundown Beirut apartment building, with Ali chain-smoking his way through my questions. But, suddenly, Ali seemed to get frustrated with the questions. My fieldnotes record:

Monday

Ali looks past me, sensing that I am about to ask him for more information about the *falaqa*. He stands up quickly and moves outside the room, calling for Ahmed, a Palestinian man living in the same building. I am left holding my cup of *mati* and somewhat confused by the abrupt halt to the interview. But, quickly, Ali returns. Returns holding an AK-47. Sensing my apprehension, my eyes trained on the rifle, he laughs and says, 'don't worry *ya akhi*' before pointing the gun at me and clicking the trigger; the firing pin pings and he bursts out laughing. I am confused by the change of atmosphere. Previously, Ali was speaking in a monotone voice, pausing at times – clearly troubled – and now he was mock-executing me with an AK-47 while laughing heartily. He pushes the gun into my hands; its

⁶⁷ Austin, 'Torture and the material-semiotic networks of violence across borders'.

⁶⁸ All quotes and notes below are taken from fieldwork conducted between 2014–18 in Beirut, Lebanon. All names have been changed. For discussions of the methodology, see Austin, 'A parasitic critique for International Relations'; Jonathan Luke Austin, 'Accessing lifeworlds: Getting people to say the unsayable', in *Secrecy and Methodology in Critical Security Research* (London, UK: Routledge, 2019).

weight immediately droops my arms down and Ali laughs even harder. This is only the second time I have held a rifle in my life, and it shows. I quickly shift the weight upwards and attempt to look halfway competent in its handling. This does not impress Ali: 'Counter-Strike, huh?'. On reflection, it was probably – exactly – the computer game *Counter-Strike* that had taught me how to hold this rifle. Ali then lies down on the hallucinogenically coloured carpeted floor and says 'Ok: I'll show you.' He lifts his feet in the air, pushing his slippers off as he does so, and says: 'Ok: tie my feet!' He repeats this a second time and says: 'you want to know how it's done, see for yourself.' Going along with his request rather reluctantly, I approach Ali's feet, his face bemused, and hang the rifle strap downwards from the rifle, slipping his feet through it – 'turn it now, he says' – I twist the rifle (clumsily, eventually working out the best way to grasp it from both sides while twisting) and his ankles come to rest on the rifle. 'Twist it once more,' he instructs. I do so and his feet are now firmly tightened around the rifle. 'That it's it,' Ali says, 'a child could do it – the rifle does everything for you.' I unwrap Ali's feet and he smiles back at me, seeming to be quite happy to have found a way to answer my question without words. He continues: 'And then you would need something for the whip; look over there at the TV, you could use the cord connecting it to the power. Everything you need is in this room. The *falaqa* is not complicated.'

Tuesday

I wake up late. After spending the morning reading, and having lunch, I follow my usual routine and head to 'Green Café' on Sassine Square, Achrafieh. I take my usual route. Turning the corner, around 50 metres from my apartment, on a road I have passed hundreds of times, I suddenly stop. I notice a cable hanging from one of the many ill-constructed metal electricity poles that dot Beirut: an electrical cable hanging down at eye level. Previously, I had microscopically altered my path to avoid it. But today, the cable stopped me as I recalled Ali's words about objects suitable for using as a whip. I am troubled. I continue my walk and arrive at the café, in thought. Halim, the Egyptian waiter with whom I am now good friends, arrives with my usual now unnecessary to request order: a *tufahtayn* 'argilla' (apple shisha) and bottle of water. We discuss the upcoming Champions League quarterfinals, a regular topic of conversation in Beirut's cafés at the moment, and then I settle down to work. After a few minutes I look up, past one of the TVs suspended on the wall that are ubiquitous in Middle Eastern cafes. Its cable hangs down in a loop from the socket, and I think back – again – to Ali's lessons. I've started to see things differently.

Prior to this conversation, my interviews with violence workers had been seeking (although the term was then not in my mind) declarations from my interlocutors of what usually 'went unsaid' about their activities. To do so, I was deploying the 'ethnographic interviewing' method described by James Spradley.⁶⁹ By posing questions that provoke respondents to lay out their everyday activities in sequences, paying close attention to, and then employing within the interview, their own terminology, and drawing out the material structure of their lifeworld, the hope is that we can gain a thick vision of the complexity of practical action. Declarations of the multiplicity of a subject's lifeworld are likely to follow from the accounts these questions elicit because they do not ask for precise details of *why* something occurred, but focus instead more simply on how things are done, how things are achieved, and so allow us to tease out practical knowledge through what is effectively a *reperformance* of practice. At an earlier stage in my interview with Ali, for instance, I had begun by asking him to enumerate the numerous torture techniques that he had seen or used himself against prisoners. His list included the *dulab* (tyre), the 'German Chair', the *shabeh*, the

⁶⁹J. P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979).

use of electricity, and several others with which I was already familiar.⁷⁰ Upon following up to ask whether he had seen any other additional techniques, he replied, ‘normal beating, of course, every day, and sometimes we would keep them outside when it was cold, once we used, how do you say it, waterboarding.’ This later mention of waterboarding was very unusual. Syrian torture follows a set pattern of techniques that rarely includes waterboarding and so I was puzzled why this technique was used. On pressing him, Ali explained:

This was just once. For a *takfiri* prisoner. You know these guys when they get to us they are already very resistant. And we have to treat them differently, they are a different case, you understand? We were told to give him something special. Waterboarding was just one idea. ... I can’t remember who came up with it, it was just done, I’d never done it before, somebody said they had seen it on *Facebook*. We were three. I held his legs down, tightly, Ahmed held his shoulders, and Hassan pulled his *tamisha* [leather or cloth blindfold] down from his eyes and put it over his mouth and poured water over it. He coughed water. We only did it once, then we went back to the other stuff.

Ali recalled few further details about this incident and was far more proficient in enumerating the practical contours of more regularly used torture techniques in Syria. But this example is important for us given his mention of Facebook. Pressed into a particular situation, being told to do ‘something special’ against a dehumanised prisoner, a novel possibility was found in the ‘knowledge flow’ of Facebook, which peripherally embedded practical knowledge into the situation. And the rough contours of this process of carrying out violence through peripheral knowledge was something that violence workers described repeatedly, beyond Ali. In other cases, men mentioned copying a style of beating from action movies they had seen in childhood, or from watching videos on YouTube, or even books, fictional and non-fictional, they had once read. Moreover, it must also be stressed that popular culture is far from the only source of such knowledge flows. As other empirical accounts have shown, it would be equally possible to replace that focus with other objects: cultural objects more broadly, textual inscriptions, technological infrastructures, analogue material tools and objects, and beyond.⁷¹ Recording these means of knowledge transfer had become routine but, crucially, it was not until this exchange with Ali that I more fully considered what these declarations tell us about how violence workers discover and utilise their practices, and what this says about us as observing social scientists or, more broadly, as individuals who presume ourselves to be different from such men.

So, Ali initiated me into violence by integrating me into his reperformance of its contours and, in so doing, forced a set of self-realizations *vis-à-vis* my own immersion in the plasma of violence. In the extract quoted above this took two forms. Firstly, it provoked me to draw on my own reserve of popular cultural knowledge in the form of video games to know how to hold a rifle. That knowledge was not supposed to be part of the social field I was occupying but it remained latently accessible – part of the plasma of my life – at the moment where I was forced to guess how to hold a rifle. It was Ali who interpreted, correctly, the origins of what I had abductively practiced. Secondly, Ali deliberately engineered a deconstruction of the ‘functional fixity’ of everyday objects that surround us. Functional fixedness is a concept derived from Gestalt psychology that describes the cognitive bias that sees us limit our use of everyday objects to the ways in which they are traditionally used: a rifle is for shooting, a television cable is for connecting to the

⁷⁰Respectively: in the *dulab*, a prisoner’s body is contorted into a tyre and whipped; in the ‘German Chair’, a prisoner’s body is contorted around a chair and beaten; in the *shabeh*, a victim is suspended from the ceiling.

⁷¹See Austin, ‘Torture and the material-semiotic networks of violence across borders’; Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘We have never been civilized: Torture and the materiality of world political binaries’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:1 (2017).

power.⁷² It can be seen as a materialist version of the difficulty we have in conceptualising the relevance of knowledge from peripheral domains *vis-à-vis* that which is practically enacted in a particular social field. Ali decomposed this functional fixedness, step-by-step, *vis-à-vis* the *falaqa*, by demonstrating how the objects of the AK-47 and the power cable could be used in distinct ways. Indeed, although not discussed here, the knowledge contained within (or associated to) material objects is another central form of peripheral knowledge in violence. Taken together, these two moves led me to better understand a remark made by another Syrian perpetrator of torture, who I had interviewed some time before, Hamza. Hamza had discussed the same torture technique as Ali and in my fieldnotes I record his remarks that:

‘Everybody knows how to do this.’ I ask *Hamza* to expand on this a bit more and he explains: ‘When you are there for the first time you watch what the others do, and everyone knows what to do, when they pick up the rifle you go get the whip, or when someone gets the whip you get the rifle. It doesn’t need much organisation. We’ve seen this on TV since we are kids, the *falaqa* is quite normal here. And when you have done it many times then it becomes automatic, your body just moves to do it. It’s like the rifle, we have all done military training, we know we can use it in a few different ways. I first saw it used in the *falaqa* there a long time ago, ten years ago, before I ever saw it used again, but then – you still know – you can twist the strap like that.’

First reflecting on these words, I took Hamza’s remarks that everybody knows how to do this to refer to the specific world of violence workers. A place whose knowledge was far from me. But upon meeting Ali, I could not help but take this everybody literally: to include me, the author, and you, the reader. I could not help but dwell on the possibility that I had already known the violence I was now studying *before I had even begun studying it*. To be sure, my knowledge might not include the *falaqa* but it would include distinct and equally violent potentialities. After conducting my interviews with Syrian perpetrators of torture, a simple realisation thus declared itself: you already know violence. Not just abstractly. Not just culturally. Not just strategically. But as part of the plasma constantly lying in reserve in your peripheral vision. While we might require somebody like Ali to make us realise this fact, our capacity to act on that knowledge – to hold a rifle more-or-less correctly, or even torture a body – exists pre-consciously, I am suggesting. Ali’s revealing of this multiplicity within myself stayed with me, as the second extract above shows: reality began to appear differently to me walking through Beirut’s streets. After all of this, I had started to see things differently.

The politics of self-declaration

Violence flows like a viscous plasma around us all. In a sentence, that’s the argument I have tried to construct above. My point here is not that violence is innate to human nature, nor that certain institutional structures aren’t more or less prone to violence. Rather, it is that the global material, cultural, and technological embedding of violence across history renders it a force always standing in reserve and so potentially accessible to any person. While such a view echoes more classical secular discussions of the nature of political evil, as well as more contemporary rearticulations of those views in pragmatist and complexity thinking, my goal in this article has been to ground the consequences of such theorisations at a very practical and quotidian level.⁷³ I have sought to do so in two main ways. First, I explored the micro-level enactment of violence through the cases of

⁷²Robert E. Adamson, ‘Functional fixedness as related to problem solving’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 44:4 (1952).

⁷³See, among others, Ken Booth, ‘The human faces of terror’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:1 (2008); Austin, ‘The departed militant’; Alain Badiou, *Ethics* (London, UK: Verso, 2001).

Baha Mousa and my own conversations with real-world perpetrators of torture. Second, I sought to expand our frames of reference to see the depths to which this plasma of violence can flow by dwelling on the possible connections between the practice of science and violence.

Following this, it is important to note that my argument is both specific and general. On the one hand, the empirical focus of this article has been in the practice of torture, read through both the death of Baha Mousa and the unexpected emergence of tortuous practices within the domain of science. This limits the scope of particular elements of this discussion to such practices to some degree. On the other hand, however, the argument constructed here is generalisable in the sense that the broad dynamics described are applicable to most contemporary forms of political violence (as seen, for example, in de Landa's work on the dynamics of modern-day warfare). More broadly, drawing on STS-based approaches to explore political violence also connects this argument to a far more general theory of social phenomenon. Originally geared towards understanding the practice of science, my goal has been to show how these approaches are equally valuable in exploring political violence. In my view, this is important in de-dramatising our understanding of political violence by situating its emergence directly within the banal yet complex dynamics of *all* social phenomena.

At a conceptual level, my hope is that such a local grounding of the dynamics of political evil can help redress difficulties that IR and cognate fields face in deploying STS-based sociotechnical approaches. As Jef Huysmans and Joao Nogueira have written, despite shifts across the discipline towards embracing an STS-informed non-linear, multiple, and complex ontology of the social, there remains a strong instinct to give 'micro and heterogeneous practices significance beyond themselves' through a return to 'master-signifiers such as "neo-liberalism", "capitalism", "humanity", and "sovereignty"'.⁷⁴ Such signifiers risk returning us to the assumption of duplicity, with which this article began, reducing violence to something structurally beyond the practice of the everyday. It must be noted nonetheless that the attraction to these signifiers is clearly normatively grounded: how can we attribute responsibility for global violence in any other way? Even if this account of violence as a plasmatic force is correct in one way or another, this ethico-political question requires a satisfactory answer if it is to have a socionormative value for tackling the prevalence of violence.

Speculatively, I would venture that the normative potential of this account rests on the way it closes the gap between the observer and the observed in often quite unsettling ways. I mean this in a rather specific sense. I am not arguing, necessarily, for an ethnographic embedding of the researcher in the object of her study, or about simply getting closer to the empirical world. Nor am I solely describing the necessity of reflexively recognising our positionality and the reality, for instance, that social science has long connections to processes of colonisation implicated in the emergence of violence (namely the imperial legacy of the British in Iraq).⁷⁵ While all this is key, I have focused here more strongly on questioning the idea that, at the base level of human practice, there exists a qualitative difference between the violence workers depicted herein, myself, and the reader. This is not solely the classical Arendtian discussion of how ordinary people can become the embodiment of evil under certain institutional, ideational, etc. circumstances⁷⁶ but the claim that we are all *already* immersed in the plasma of violent knowledge and practice I have sketched. To go full circle, my claim is that we are all intimately intertwined with the 'various routes' that Mendonça described as key to the killing of Baha Mousa in 2013. We are always already peripherally proximate to the plasma of violence.

⁷⁴Jef Huysmans and Joao P. Nogueira, 'International political sociology as a mode of critique', *International Political Sociology*, 15:1 (2021), p. 6.

⁷⁵Donna Haraway, 'Situated knowledges', *Feminist Studies*, 14:3 (1988); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁷⁶See, among others, Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993); Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

My intuition, if this is true, is that a crucial normative challenge for contemporary society and social science lies in developing what we might term a method of *self-declaration*, to turn back to Stengers and her discussion of abductive method. Such a method would recognise radical commonality in spite of difference even in the face of political evil. To do so would also require embracing a ‘politics of imperceptibility’ that recognises that while it ‘may be a useful fiction to imagine that we as subjects are masters or agents of ... [the] very forces that constitute as subjects ... it is misleading’.⁷⁷ A method of self-declaration would thus be aimed at destabilising and making more fluid our self-conceptualizations as subjects. As Gilles Deleuze provocatively put it:

We have to counter people who think ‘I’m this, I’m that,’ ... by thinking in strange, fluid, unusual terms: I don’t know what I am.⁷⁸

But can such a theoretically distributed view of violence provide any practical and concrete openings towards its disruption? To begin thinking in such terms, it is possible to gain inspiration from a distinct discipline that tackles distributed, dispersed, and fluid phenomena: medicine. Across history, it is notable that the emergence of political evil has been metaphorically linked to the image of disease, infection, or physical ailment. For Michael Serres and Bruno Latour, evil is a ‘cancer’.⁷⁹ For Hannah Arendt, a ‘fungus’.⁸⁰ For Spinoza, a ‘poisoning’.⁸¹ As others note, these metaphors risk depoliticising violence by seeing it as a natural property of entities.⁸² Some individuals, states, or societies are sick and others are healthy. As Geoffrey Rose puts it *vis-à-vis* the earlier dominance of a similar inclination in medicine, the focus is too often on the ‘causes of cases’ rather than the ‘causes of incidence’.⁸³ Until remarkably recently, doctors asked ‘*Has this patient got it?*’. With the answer being a yes or a no. Analogously, social scientific accounts have tended to associate violence with statically possessed diseases: illiberalism, authoritarianism, terrorism, imperialism, etc. This creates ‘an illusion of a creative separation of disease from normality’.⁸⁴ As Rose continues, the problem is that:

No such separation really exists ... Disease comes in all sizes, and we should move away from asking ‘Has this person got it?’ towards ‘*How much of it do they have?*’. Recognition of the continuous distribution which unites the whole population, sick and healthy, is a first and necessary step towards rational prevention.⁸⁵

Not recognising either disease or violence in this distributed and population-level manner can ‘be compared with an attempt to control icebergs by sending warships to shoot off their visible portions, or with famine relief which feeds the hungry but does not tackle the causes of famine’.⁸⁶ Importantly, Rose’s work was central to the development of preventive medicine and so shifts in public health towards considering environmental causes of particular diseases (*smoking = cancer, unemployment = depression*, etc.). While now part of a general common sense that extends far beyond medicine, translating such insights into the prevention of phenomena like global political

⁷⁷Elizabeth Grosz, ‘A politics of imperceptibility: A response to “anti-racism, multiculturalism and the ethics of identification”’, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (2016).

⁷⁸Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London, UK: Verso, 1998), p. 20.

⁷⁹Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 195.

⁸⁰Hannah Arendt, ‘An exchange of letters’, *Encounter* (1964), p. 56.

⁸¹Cited in Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco, CA: City Light Books, 1988), p. 22.

⁸²Colleen Bell, ‘War and the allegory of medical intervention’, *International Political Sociology*, 6:3 (2012).

⁸³Geoffrey Rose, ‘Sick individuals and sick populations’, *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 30 (1985), p. 432.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Rose, ‘Sick individuals and sick populations’, p. 432.

violence has been exceedingly difficult. In one sense, the normative basis of this account rests precisely in advocating that we begin to think about how we might now make such a move. In other words, my proposition is that just as it is an error to ask, ‘has this person got it [a disease]’, it is an error to ask ‘is this person a torturer, is this person evil?’. Instead, we must always ask how much of it do they have? How much of a torturer are *you*? How much of it do *you* know? How much of it do *you* have expertise in? These questions require we openly declare our entanglement with the plasma of violence.

Though making this shift will be uncomfortable, it opens opportunities to expand our understanding of responsibility, politics, and ethics. By moving away from the question of whether or not men like Jorge Mendonça or Ali are innately predisposed to violence, are lying when they speak to us, or simply stand as the main problem to be solved to prevent the emergence of evil, we do not reduce the possibility of holding them to account for their actions through existing means but, instead, expand the range of objects that must be taken into account to prevent the possibility of men like them existing in the first place. Put differently, by self-declaring our own closeness to violence, we realise its status as a ‘population level’ problem more clearly and, as such, come to ask how we might prevent *ourselves* slipping into the dynamics of political evil. We can come to recognise our global embeddedness in the plasma of political violence. The result might eventually be a shift to a more prefigurative politics of designing against violence across world politics.⁸⁷

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⁸⁷Jonathan Luke Austin and Leander, ‘Designing-with/in world politics: Manifestos for an international political design’, *Political Anthropological Research in International Social Sciences*, 2:1 (2021); Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘The poetry of moans and sighs: Designs for, and against, violence’, *Frame: Journal of Literary Studies*, 33:2 (2021).