

**Adolf Tobeña**

# The psychology of terrorism

*A New York chronicle*

**On the last Monday in May North-Americans celebrate Memorial Day, a holiday dedicated to those who have fallen for the fatherland in the wars fought by this country that has led the world for the last half century. Tradition demands meaningful observance of their memory and placing floral tributes on the soldiers' tombs but falling in late Spring means that this occasion becomes an ideal weekend to take pleasure in a taste of the bettering weather and enjoy walks and lavish barbecues.**

The community of psychologists and neuroscientists called to meet by the Association for Psychological Science (APS) tends to take advantage of this long weekend at the end of May to celebrate its annual convention. This year, in 2006, the meeting was arranged in New York, shut away in a huge hotel right in the middle of Times Square, within earshot of the festive murmur of a city receiving thousands of seamen, all dressed up and extremely polite, joining the general hubbub. Meanwhile the papers were informing about cover-ups of slaughters in which their companions from the infantry had taken part in the Sunnite wasp's nest of Mesopotamia. Taking advantage of its visit to New York, the APS had decided to devote one part of the convention, almost a whole day, to the subject of the "psychology of terrorism". This was an initiative that everyone thought was very brave through coming from such a demanding group, highly encapsulated in subtle studies and as a general rule not very inclined to tread in spheres of social disciplines more proper to the pitfalls of politics. The programme, however, promised a lot because some of the great names of psychology and cognitive neuroscience of the USA were there for an in-depth discussion of the aggressive modality which made the Manhattan skyscrapers an indelible emblem after the attacks of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001.

## EXTREME APPREHENSION

It could not, nevertheless, have had a more disappointing start, limp and conventional indeed. The day was got under way by Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Economy Prize 2002, indeed the first Nobel prize-winner to have emerged from psychology (for his studies on the biases in judgements and human decision-making) presenting Paul Slovic's work on the challenges for rational decisions implied by the threat of terrorism. Slovic, a former colleague of Kahneman and highly respected expert in the perception of risks, was not very incisive at all. Impeccable comparisons between the perception of risk from long-known dangers (illnesses, cataclysms, environmental toxics...) in respect of newer and more uncertain dangers (energy crisis, nuclear waste, climatic change...) to end up stating that the apprehension generated by terrorism in US society lies at maximum levels; such an extreme aversion that it does not for example allow distinctions between the alarm about bacteriological attacks like anthrax or explosions through self-immolations in busy areas. Neither does it distinguish any obvious differences in lethality caused by the overstated peaks in a society little accustomed to punishment by its enemies.

All these matters were finely fashioned but with an utter lack of daring to tackle the underlying psychological background of the matter: what is there in the terrorists' minds and how do they succeed in persuading themselves to make their singular decisions? It all started to look like one of the aseptic sessions where academics go off at a tangent, burrowing away in details in order to avoid the core of the problem: does psychology have anything substantial to say about terrorists' motivations and objectives, and more specifically about the suicide attacks that shook the imperial power of the USA, or does it not?

It was thus very fortunate that Arie Kruglanski (College Park, University of Maryland), director of an excellence research centre set up to study precisely that, found his way back to the right path.

## THE MOTIVATIONS OF SUICIDE TERRORISTS: ADAPTIVE IMMOLATIONS?

Kruglanski saved the day by bringing up the vast ignorance about the crucial motivational vectors of the terrorists and how important research is in order to establish these. In the most customary interpretations the motivational sources lying at the base of terrorism tend to be assigned to two preferential domains: 1) ideological reasons such as the struggle against oppression, attempts to ensure the supremacy of a religious or political creed, resistance to occupation-humiliation, finding a way out of desperation-marginalisation situations... 2) the personal responses of the members of a belligerent and highly cohesive group such as: brotherhood of arms, loyalty between companions, ambition to gain high status, delirium of worldly or unworldly grandeur... Several of these motivational elements combined in a particular way are likely to have coincided in the drift towards terrorism, but one should remember that the first, the ideological ones, are above all used to legitimate the lethal actions which they carry out, with an elaborate and consistent narrative. The latter, on the other hand, are what nurture each person's background as this is accumulated in the itinerary of a combat cell.

The inciting hierarchy, the weight and the sequence of the different driving forces behind the diverse forms of terrorist action have still not been established, however. In any event, one should bear very much in mind that the notion of “terrorist predisposition” as a “syndrome” (a psychological profile of easily characterisable traits on an individual or group scale) has not to date ever received any empirical support. On the other hand, the consideration of terrorism as a “tool”, as a “strategic procedure” in the course of inter-group conflicts, has proved more fruitful and provides more workable possibilities for thinking out and designing counter-terrorist measures.

Clark McCauley (Bryn Mawr College, University of Pennsylvania) stresses this “terrorism as a means” approach and takes this to the core of the inter-group combat strategies. He states that what is usually known as “kamikaze terrorism”, to accentuate its rarity and implausibility, is actually a strictly rational option when a restricted and weak group faces a fight with a very powerful force (a military power, for example) in an attempt to sway this or win it. It is thus not the desperate conduct of a gang of individuals, but an extreme option gaining publicity for a firm victory ambition by the combat group. From a psychological standpoint the damage inflicted in the attacks does not matter so much as the immolations’ intimidatory value for the powerful target that takes the punishment, at the same time as this encourages and strengthens the support base of the terrorist group. Dying for a cause is an extremely powerful argument for mobilisation and informative impregnation of the narrative preached (“the ideal” pursued) in the recruiting intra-group. How one can doubt the intentions and persuasions of a martyrs like that? Dying for a cause also gets automatic comparison mechanisms under way in the intra-group to which the people sacrificed belong. How can one continue to be passive while there are others who give everything for the communal victory? Social comparison processes nudge the more enthusiastic sympathisers into emulation. In fact, the inspiring and imitation-arousing impact of martyrdom is not something new: it has been cultivated by religious, political and military leaders of all kinds and conditions, in all ages, when the outcome of the combat still hangs in the balance. Consider for example the quote taken by McCauley from what is possibly the best-known speech in North-American history, Abraham Lincoln’s tribute to the fallen at Gettysburg, in 1863, when the civil war had still not been won:

*From these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion —that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.*

What is more, the exaltation of sacrifice sets off increasing internal competition in order to go further in the lethality and frequency of martyrdom; not all the Palestinian groups cultivated self-immolation but during the worst years of the second Intifada there was a real escalation of suicide action by Hamas, Jihad, Martyrs of Al-Aqsa, Fatah, so as not to lose any weight in the (propaganda) race of the atrocities. Apart from this, these extreme actions seek the demolishing, hyperexaggerated response of the giant that they wish to topple, in order to heighten the injuries and thus exemplify the victimary bases for recruitment and retaliatory enthusiasm of the new recruits.

There is thus a set of processes clearly defined by psychology enabling an approach to the empirical description of the seeds of suicide terrorism, starting from the basis that this is an adaptive and absolutely rational group strategy in highly unequal combat

circumstances. McCauley has started to work on samples of young North-Americans and Ukrainians to study the activism and radicalisation processes which can lead to the threshold of pro-group sacrifice from appraising attitudes based on these concepts.

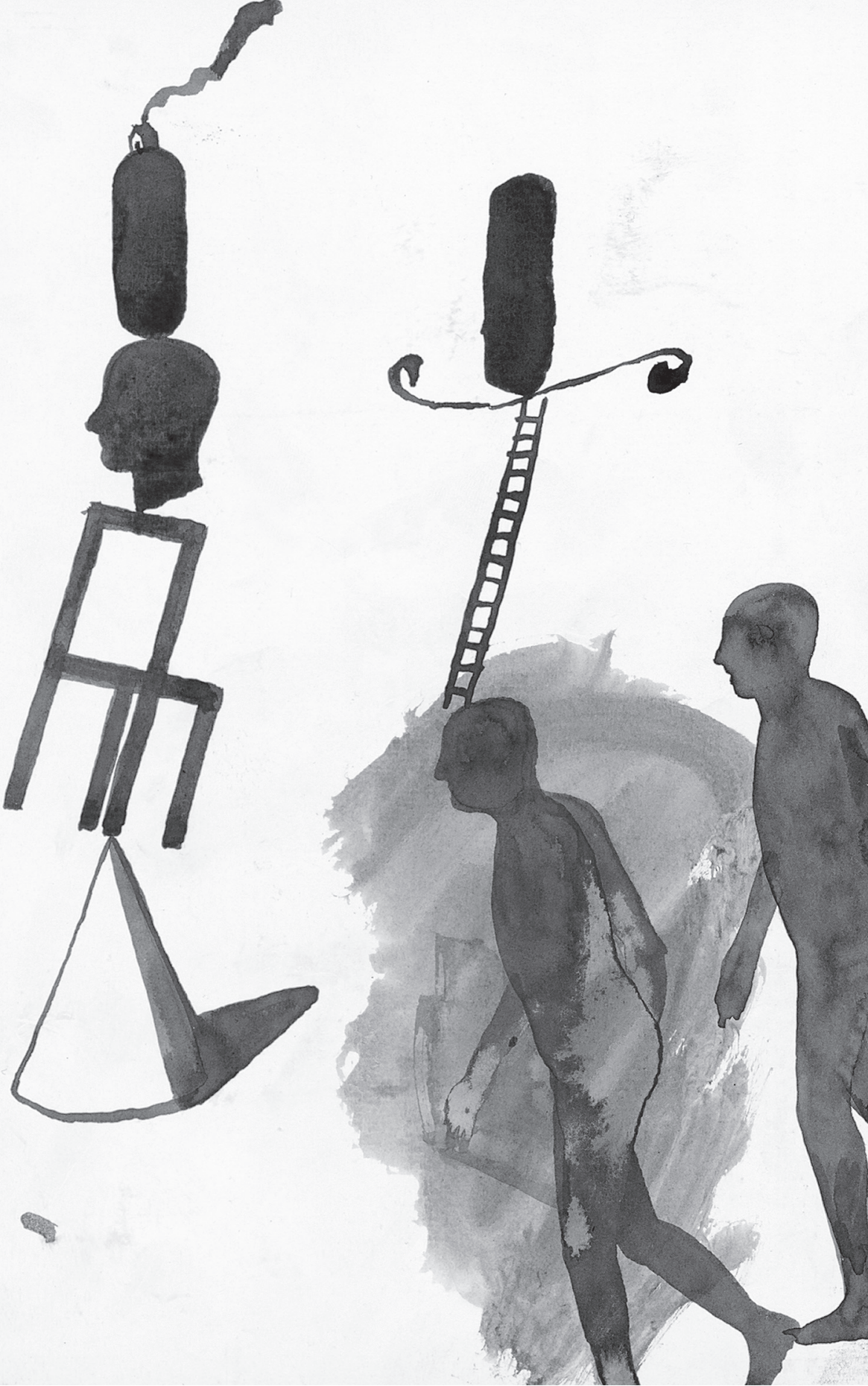
### **SYMPATHISERS OF SUICIDE SOLDIERS: NEUROENDOCRINOLOGY “ON-SITE” IN GAZA**

Ultimately, however, being a sympathiser of the suicide fighter cells is quite a different thing from being an active member or culminating the final steps of the immolation commitment. Since the two latter conditions are difficult to study (through a presumable lack of candidates), neurologist Jeff Victoroff (University of Southern California) set out to obtain data about the former, the sympathisers. He recruited a working team to investigate adolescents from the Gaza strip with the aid of Robert Sapolsky, the best-known researcher in the field of the impact of social struggles on stress hormones, from studies on troops of African baboons living in freedom. Victoroff presents data from 52 Palestinian boys of fourteen years of age on average, 22 of whom could tell stories of direct relatives imprisoned, wounded or killed by Israeli troops. Apart from using conventional questionnaires about psychological malaise (anxiety, depression, concerns, self-esteem, etc.), he built a specific scale for measuring feelings of political-social oppression (distinguishing between perceived and attributed oppression) and also measurements of religiosity, interest in politics and sympathy with terrorist activities. He had to give up certain questions (for example: “do you think that willingness for martyrdom is a compulsory commandment of Islam?”) because the whole sample replied that it was and this was no use for distinguishing anything. He took samples of saliva once a week over four weeks in order to obtain determinations of cortisol and testosterone in a replication of Sapolsky’s studies with baboons, in a traumatic environment of confrontation

between human troops (one should remember that previous Palestinian studies had established that 86% of the boys of this age had been involved in hostilities —throwing stones or incendiary devices— against the Israeli patrols. The results showed first and foremost that the boys in Gaza had high rates of anxiety and depression,

verging on psychopathology. On the other hand, they did not display any particular aggressiveness: the figures lay within the normal ranges for western populations. This constitutes a good example of the limitations and advantages of this sort of psychometrical measurements; particularly precarious living conditions, with intense daily worries and few future prospects in a refugee camp, in a chronic armed conflict situation, are reflected in an anxious/depressive dysphoria that the measurements show up, although the scales of aggressiveness do not manage to reflect any of the combative activity regularly practised by most of the boys. The depression marks were predictive of the sympathy

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Artur Heras (2006)  
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23 x 35 cm

for suicide terrorism, in such a way that the greater the demoralisation/despair seen, the greater the support for this form of struggle. The measurements of aggressiveness, on the other hand, predicted the oppression perceived, in such a way that the greater the aggressiveness, the more feelings of oppression. The cortisol levels, however, were not associated with depression (in a paradoxical result, which contradicts hundreds of previous well-established studies), while they do indeed positively predict the level of anxiety and negatively the aggressiveness, as is fitting. This makes one doubt the correctness of the “depression” measurements or the characterisation of such dysphoria/unease/irritation/despair as “depression”. The results with the testosterone figures may explain this: they were not associated with aggressiveness, nor with sympathies for terrorism, nor with the perceived oppression for the whole sample, but when the eight boys with the highest testosterone levels were separated in respect of the eight with the lowest figures, the results became very different indeed, obtaining maximum expressions of sympathy for anti-Israeli suicide terrorism and the maximum oppression perceived in the boys with the most masculine hormone circulating. The conclusion is, as one might have expected, that a struggle for dominance and combat status is involved in the groups of adolescents sympathising with Palestinian terrorist movements, in such a way that those with more marked activation of male hormones are seen as the most belligerent, regardless of their living conditions. Social despair therefore counts in the attitudes of adolescent sympathisers of terrorism, but so does their initial hormonal combativeness. All of this, we should repeat, is valid only for a sample (valuable, but restricted) of sympathisers in a particular place. It says nothing, or very little, about the vectors leading to the direct implication in the execution of self-immolation attacks. For it must again be stressed that being a sympathiser and cooperating with groups that practice suicide terrorism is one thing, but lending oneself to be the human bomb is quite another.

In any event, this kind of data is highly valuable. Victoroff explains that a bibliographic research of the scientific literature devoted to terrorism in the last fifteen years gives 1808 entries: only 48 of them give any empirical data (most of it economic and socio-epidemiological) and only ten refer to direct information coming from individuals who had been involved in suicide cells. There is thus a pressing need to obtain data and the direction taken at the APS convention in New York will be of use to blaze the trail. At the poster sessions associated with the symposium there was a promising crop of data connected in more than one case with a consortium of U.S. research groups which has been created for empirical studies of the psychology of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Most however refer to questions of social perception or of biases in racial attitudes connected with the terrorist impact. The persistence of traumatic memories was also a preferential subject but here the works of doctor Elisabeth Phelps are particularly worthy of mention in this regard.

### **NEW YORKERS' “FAILING MEMORIES” OF 11<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER**

Liz Phelps leads a highly active group in New York University that had already done studies on neuroimages with fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) on the disappearance of the traces of traumatic memories. The “Phelps Lab” is just by Washington Square, in Greenwich Village, not far at all from the financial district of

Manhattan, and they went through 11<sup>th</sup> September tragedy like close neighbours. A week after they got an ambitious study on the memory of these events under way, taking advantage of the momentum of a broad research consortium expressly created (9-11 Memory Consortium Research Program). On 17<sup>th</sup> September 2001 the interviews started with a sample of 546 residents in New York and citizens of many other places in the USA, coming to a total number of 1495 subjects. A year later, in August 2004, they did it again. The 11<sup>th</sup> September gave an ideal opportunity to analyse the evolution of “failing memories” (memories of public events) because the impact was of such a scale that it has become a milestone to define a stage in the life of all those who lived through it either directly or as a second-hand experience (it has in fact taken over in the North-Americans’ imaginations from the standard question “where were you and what were you doing the day they assassinated President Kennedy?”).

When the results of New Yorkers’ answers were compared with others from the USA, no overall differences appeared in the consistency of the memory, neither a week later, nor a year, nor three years later. There is a similar reliability when detailing how they lived through the tragedy, what they

were doing and where they were, who was accompanying them, how they reacted, where they went, what feelings they had, etc. In some details, however, there were substantial differences in New Yorkers’ favour as regards the precision of the memory: they could more accurately remember the specificity of the attacks (number of aircraft taking part, times and temporal sequence of the attacks, lapse and order in which the towers collapsed, where president Bush was

and what he was doing meanwhile, etc.). Living through these cataclysmic raids as a citizen thus increased the memory’s attention to detail and above all the confidence and vividness of the memories. Since the sample of New Yorkers included people who had lived through the collapse of the Twin Towers very closely as eyewitnesses while others experienced it from places far away from Manhattan, two different groups were set up in order to compare the respective memories and ask them to bring to mind particular sequences in an fMRI system, while they were given brain scans as the traumatic event was recalled. The group of eyewitnesses had to have experienced the tragedy downtown, with the NYU campus as the farthest point away (two miles from the World Trade Center), while the second group had to have gone through this at least from midtown (four and a half miles from the World Trade Center) and further out. Clear differences were seen, with an increase in the intensity, the vividness, the sensation of threat and the peculiar sensorial experiences (qualities of the smell of the air, for example), in the group of close eyewitnesses. Many of the New Yorkers further away from the catastrophe point said that they had not actually seen anything live, that when they heard the news they had followed it on the Internet or television. The witnesses close to the area attacked,

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who were even able to describe olfactory subtleties about the day, revealed relationships between the vividness/threat of the memory and the activation of the left cerebellar tonsil as well as some parts of the hippocampus. The quality of the “failing memories” thus varies, depending on the proximity to the disturbing event. Only the closer witnesses retain criteria of detailed vivid memories, with a strong tendency to forgetfulness. The other citizens who lived through the shock use the event as a milestone in their lives and retain marker elements, but the concern and vividness of the memory are lower and with little cerebral impact when the experience is recalled. These are events which confirm diverse studies which had already found fissures in the supposed strength of the “failing memories”.

### **ABU GHRAIB: THE “BANALITY” OF TORTURE AND THE “LUCIFER EFFECT”**

Philip Zimbardo packed the room where he was to talk on the “Lucifer effect”. He was welcomed with “bravos” and enthusiastic acclaim by an audience consisting mainly of young post-graduates. Zimbardo is a legend in North-American psychology, a Bronx boy brought up in Manhattan, where he had earned his first income selling sweets at Broadway shows, who rose to leading a weighty Social Psychology Department in California and succeeded in making its manuals the most widely used in the USA and also in many places in Europe (his *Psychology and life* series on video/DVD have been seen in thousands of homes in Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands, with an introduction by television personality Dr. Joan Corbella). Zimbardo positively oozes actor’s resources through all his pores. As a professor emeritus of Stanford and (retired) president of APS he still enjoys giving massively attended courses, continues to foster research and is devoted to an impassioned anti-Bush activism, which no doubt rejuvenates him and gives him notoriety (you only have to see his powerful web site, [www.zimbardo.com](http://www.zimbardo.com), to get a sample of his many widely publicised initiatives. Zimbardo has taken on special relief over the last few years as a popular personality, through his well-known defence of one of the soldiers found guilty of tortures and humiliations of Iraqi prisoners committed in Abu Ghraib prison —specifically, sergeant Ivan “Chip” Frederick, from all accounts a characteristic example of the normal American boy, balanced, a good scout and a good Christian, liked in his community, married, a loyal and loving adoptive father, but in Abu Ghraib the one who let the dogs pull right up to the prisoners’ faces (on photos which went right around the world) and took an active part in the simulation of electrical tortures and in the sexual humiliations immortalised in photos taken by the soldiers themselves. This dishonourable conduct led the army and administration of the USA, after the due disciplinary research, to opt for the explanation of the “rotten apples” in a mainly exemplary barrel. The soldiers participating were indeed demoted and thrown out of the army, with the responsibility also extending to high prison officials in demotions which reached the rank of general. Zimbardo, on the other hand, maintained that the conducts observed and filmed in Abu Ghraib are quite expectable in conditions like the ones found there and that one cannot demand responsibility from the boys and girls because it is not a problem of a few rotten apples, but of a whole rotten barrel. In his words “you cannot be a sweet cucumber in a vinegar barrel.”

Zimbardo’s position stems not only from the objective analysis of the situation in Abu Ghraib (through revenge for the recent loss of companions, overcrowding with prisoners, work

overload, instructions from the authorities to put pressure on the prisoners interrogated, etc.) that the official investigations have already recognised. It stems above all from decades of sound research into social psychology which show that the “majority” of human beings go beyond the bounds of contention and join in the humiliation, degradation and torture of victims when the “contextual conditions” propitiate this. The experiments backing this assertion are to be found in all psychology text books and show that ordinary human beings, perfectly normal men and women, with no kind of deviation or psychopathology, set off obedience mechanisms which can lead to the physical torture of innocent persons, when they form part of a respected authority structure (“Milgram” experiments in the fifties, repeated on thousands of subjects and in highly varying conditions); when they have to watch over prisoners or detainees in conditions favourable for dehumanisation and deindividuation, such as numerical identification, belittling uniforms, handcuffs, fetters, bags on the head etc. (“Stanford prison experiment” 1971, led by Zimbardo himself) lead to all the conducts that were recorded in Abu Ghraib (even the sexual humiliation and the “trophy photos” to remember the “festive banality” of the events). Zimbardo embellishes his presentation, showing videos of the Abu Ghraib events that have never been shown in full on television, recalling the gestation of those classic experiments illustrating the power of repetitions and the refinements that have been brought into them later on. He ends up by showing some intimate moments in the extremely normal life of sergeant “Chip” Frederick, whose friend he has become since taking part in his legal defence. The whole talk was in fact devoted to publicising his next book *The Lucifer effect, understanding how good people turn evil*, which, as he said, he had handed over to his publishers the day before, taking advantage of his visit to New York. The excitement aroused led him to take much longer than the hour’s talk allotted by the Congress and the enthusiastic auditorium allowed him to give an extra half-hour’s speech devoted in the final stages to slamming the Bush administration “the most incompetent in the history of the USA, which has dedicated itself to setting up “rotten barrels” in its unfocussed war against terror at the same time as damaging the prestige of the North-American people all over the world”).

The main problem with these “contextual/situational” approaches so well loved by social psychology is that it can lead to not blaming anyone (except for the latest Bush/Lucifer of course). Zimbardo stresses the role of the “heroes” that in the aforementioned experiments and in real life (there were internal denunciations of Abu Ghraib by North-American soldiers) rebel against the contextual pressure, however strong this may be, and refuse to discriminate, humiliate or torture victims. But it seems to me that it is not enough to stress the role of the exception-heroes, almost always present to a greater or lesser extent, to solve the problem of the gradation of implications and guilt. I feel that there should be some fine psychological analysis to provide a hierarchy of individual responsibilities in criminal conduct committed in the framework of a group pressure. This was understood by the judge of the Frederick case, quashing Zimbardo’s arguments, when he gave this soldier a severe sentence because he understood that there is almost always a margin of freedom in each person’s actions, and that a necessary assumption of responsibilities stems from this principle. After all, not all the people who worked in the Abu Ghraib prison acted in the same way. Among the participants themselves in that macabre torture episode there were also different degrees of involvement. This rule, so simple and wise, which prudent jurists have attempted to apply for thousands of years, often tends to be forgotten by the social scientists of our age (from the stronghold of a few absolutely pertinent but partial experiments and the facts behind them) ||

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