

# Anti-Torture Strike in California Prisons

Many Americans were shocked by how the Bush administration treated “war on terror” detainees and others were startled when the Obama administration abused suspected WikiLeaks leaker Bradley Manning in a military brig. But the larger scandal may be how common such prison cruelty is in the United States, as Marjorie Cohn explains.

By Marjorie Cohn

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The torture of prisoners in U.S. custody isn't confined to foreign countries. For more than two weeks, inmates at California's Pelican Bay State Prison have been on a hunger strike to protest torturous conditions in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) there.

Prisoners have been held for years in solitary confinement, which can amount to torture. Thousands of inmates throughout California's prison system have refused food in solidarity with the Pelican Bay prisoners, bringing the total of hunger strikers to more than 1,700.

Inmates in the SHU are confined to their cells for 22 ½ hours a day, mostly for administrative convenience. They are released for only one hour to walk in a small area with high walls. The cells in the SHU are eight feet by 10 feet with no windows. Fluorescent lights are often kept on 24 hours per day.

Solitary confinement can lead to hallucinations, catatonia and even suicide, particularly in mentally ill prisoners. It is considered torture, as journalist Lance Tapley explains in his chapter on American Supermax prisons in *The United States and Torture: Interrogation, Incarceration, and Abuse*.

The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons (CSAAP), which is headed by a former U.S. attorney general and a former chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals, found: “People who pose no real threat to anyone and also those who are mentally ill are languishing for months or years in high-security units.”

The commission also stated, “In some places, the environment is so severe that people end up completely isolated, confined in constantly bright or constantly dim spaces without any meaningful contact torturous condition that are proven to cause mental deterioration.”

Prisoners in other California prisons have reported that medications, including

those for high blood pressure and other serious conditions, are being withheld from prisoners on strike.

“The situation is grave and urgent,” according to Carol Strickman, a lawyer for the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition. “We are fighting to prevent a lot of deaths at Pelican Bay. The CDCR [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation] needs to negotiate with these prisoners, and honor the request of the strike leaders to have access to outside mediators to ensure that any negotiations are in good faith.”

One of the hunger strike demands is an end to the “debriefing process” at Pelican Bay. Prisoners are forced to name themselves or others as gang members as a condition of access to food or release from isolation. Naming others as gang members itself amounts to a death sentence due to retaliation by other prisoners.

In May, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that incarceration in California prisons constitutes unconstitutional cruel and unusual punishment.

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## American Right and Limits of Logic

American politics is increasingly defined by a struggle that pits religious fundamentalism and anti-government true-belief against rationality and liberalism, with the former combination gaining gradual dominance over the latter. But poet Phil Rockstroh says both sides fail to grasp the coming collapse of today’s political/economic model.

By Phil Rockstroh

July 19, 2011

As of late, Pat Robertson has been waxing apocalyptic regarding mankind’s imminent reckoning with wrathful divinity, while liberals have been sharing scary bedtime stories by the ghostly light of computer screens telling sleep-banishing tales of Michele (“Crazy Eyes”) Bachmann, now stalking primary states, assailing common sense and chewing the scenery of sanity during appearances on the 24/7 Creature Feature Theatre, otherwise known as, Cable News programming.

Granted, the sense of unease displayed by right-wing, fundamentalist Christians regarding the state of the nation is understandable; although, their attribution as to the origin and cause of the destructive drift of U.S. culture is so far off the mark they would fail to get wet if they fell into a baptismal pool the size of Lake Michigan.

Michele Bachmann, Sarah Palin, Pat Robertson et al, these late-empire zealots of shopping mall, militarism and heterosexual hegemony, harbor a comic, yet mortifying vision of the conditions they believe would bring rebirth and renewal to the nation.

Believing, it seems, all that is good and decent can be salvaged, if only the U.S. would be transformed into an earthly analog of their fantasy of an immaculately scrubbed and deodorized, caucasoid heaven (which, of course, to all others, seems a nightmare world where W.A.S.P. faces are permanently affixed on the whole of multi-visaged humanity – a death mask made of white bread) – a creepy, blood-bereft, restricted country club Hyperborea, sustained by holy militarism, where well-turned-out, obedient children of the Lord await the Second Coming – a cartoon universe deus ex machina – vis-À-vis the arrival of their version of Jesus Christ – who seems to resemble a cross between a muscle-blessed, Hollywood super-hero and an eternally vigilant, sin-scouring Tidy Bowl Man.

Invoking an impassioned narrative of blood, thunder and descending, supernatural balm, fundamentalism is an attempt, albeit desperate and misguided, to mitigate the uncertainty and angst incurred by the poetry-decimating literalism of the industrial/consumer age.

This system of belief, internalized in the psyches of the populace of the U.S., falls into the Calvinist/Puritan tradition and therefore carries a nostalgic longing for the imagined innocence of lost paradise, regards imperfection as sin and the imagination as suspect, and believes that a vengeful, omniscient God banished humanity from paradise because of our serpent-gifted lust for life and longing for knowledge.

These lost souls of wanting credulity and noxious certitude believe their shame is their ticket back to paradise. If only they could just hate themselves (and the world enough) – then they will be made perfect in the perfect love of The Lord. They are, of course, insane.

Accordingly, what events and circumstances are responsible for this free-floating psychotic episode extant as the belief system of contemporary,

fundamentalist Christianity?

“And all the Arts of Life they changed into the Arts of Death in Albion.”<sup>1</sup>,  
Jerusalem, Chapter 3, William Blake

Early in the Industrial Age, William Blake apprehended humankind had begun to negotiate existence “[a]mong these dark Satanic mills.”

Blake was not mortified by the mill itself: He was repelled by the imprint the machine left on the mind. This was the factor that he deemed Satanic i.e., positing the image as metaphor for the manner that Satan, the mythical embodiment of the human psyche’s unconscious drives, desires and compulsions (and attendant rationalizations) can imprison the human psyche and chain it in his service.

Recognizing and rejecting the principles of the mechanized age for its dehumanizing implications, Blake warned against a view of the world that reduces human life to the sum of machine parts – for the metaphoric hell-bound train of thought that it is usurping individual identity by commandeering the hours of fleeting existence by placing one’s body at the service of greed-driven, nature-decimating agendas.

“Kept ignorant of its use, that they might spend the days of wisdom<sup>2</sup> In sorrowful drudgery, to obtain a scanty pittance of bread:<sup>3</sup> In ignorance to view a small portion and think that All,<sup>4</sup> And call it Demonstration: blind to all the simple rules of life.”<sup>5</sup>, Jerusalem, Chapter 3, William Blake

As circumstances stand at present, Blake exhibited caution in his augury: An island of garbage, larger than the state of Texas, floats in the Pacific Ocean. Increasing numbers of U.S. children, obese from corporate processed food, are so unhealthy they’re falling prey to the illnesses of middle age.

The topsoil of the American Mid-West has all but disappeared due to the shortsighted greed of industrial mega-farming.

This is why (to cite only a few examples) the present paradigm’s days are numbered. And this is not Old Testament-variety raving spittle-flinging, white-beard flapping in the harsh desert wind, dark prophetic fantasy. The examples above simply augur the mundane trajectory inherent to systems locked in entropic runaway.

Fortunately, there is a type of hope that resides at the depths of hopelessness the perennial truth that arrives when one relinquishes all hope that one’s

ossified understandings and moribund means of existing in the world cannot be maintained nor salvaged.

I came into a place void of all light,â€”which bellows like the sea in tempest,â€”when it is combated by warring winds.â€”– The Divine Comedy, The Inferno, Canto V, lines 28-30

Dante's epic poem, The Divine Comedy, resonates on a number of levels. It is important to note how the poet limned the suburbs of Hell as being, a place reserved for those souls who refused to choose either good or evil. And, seemingly, a prime location for Wal-Mart big-box stores.

This miserable state is borne by the wretched souls of those who lived without disgrace and without praise.â€”– The Divine Comedy, The Inferno, Canto III, lines 34-36

(Apropos, I offer this completely gratuitous fantasy: Of Sam Walton, ruthless emblem of the age of corporate despotism, with his reptilian rictus forever affixed in a forced smile of tyrannical good cheer, condemned for all eternity to be a greeter at the gates of Hell.)

In contrast, Dante counseled, we are provided with a more propitious option: to walk through Hell, as opposed to remaining locked in the stasis of an insular, unexamined existence.

Dante evoked the descent into the underworld to intimate the understanding that darkness is an aspect of human nature and that self-awareness arrives only after an exploration of the hidden, self-censored regions of one's psyche.

Only after passing through the inner most circle of the frozen hell-scape does it become possible for Dante to look upward and gaze upon Beatrice's splendor among the spheres of Heaven.

His Journey began, lost in a dark woods, with his path block by a hungry she-wolf and fierce lion. Then, led there by the pagan poet, Virgil, the adamantine gates of Hell (posting that famous sign regarding hope forever abandoned) slammed shut behind him. But the poet's descent deep into the unsavory aspects of his nature made possible those glimpses of beatific light.

You, darkness, that I come fromâ€”I love you more than all the firesâ€”that fence in the world, â€”for the fire makes a circle of light for everyoneâ€”and then no one outside learns of you.

But the darkness pulls in everything—“shapes and fires, animals and myself,  
“how easily it gathers them! —“powers and people—

and it is possible a great presence is moving near me

I have faith in night

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Otherwise, as is the case with the Puritan/Calvinist imagination, an individual risks becoming purity-obsessed and light-intoxicated, i.e., lacking in the will and ability to see the dark side of their nature; hence, one is prone to project one's own motives on the actions of others.

Possessed by this state of mind, an individual is capable of inflicting a great amount of damage on his own psyche. Witness: the raging, lower-order demons, inhabiting their own personal hell-scapes, as channeled by the likes of Bachmann, Palin and the Rev. Robertson.

Yet, rationalistic devices such as reductionist reasoning and humanistic psychology have proven useless in breaching the high walls of delusion-bulwarking fundamentalist, free-floating crazy.

Why? Reductionism is a bi-product of the western Puritan/Calvinist tradition, and as such is prone to the pathologies inherent in the cosmology wherein there exists: an habitual winnowing down of perception to controllable, exploitable bits; the dismissing of all things (the veracity of imagination, the emanations of nature and the souls of animals) that do not serve narrowed agendas (which are defining characteristics of its scion – the corporate state – and those within its institutions who have internalized its *raison d'être*).

Both fundamentalist and reductionist mindsets are cemented in certitude. In fact, each is the shadow side of the other; hence, hyper-rationalists and religious literalists are locked in contemptuous embrace.

Both evince, with their obsession with the other, a longing for rapprochement with their missing half, yet their encounters become a courtship dance of animus and antagonism, whereby their mutual yearning for union is expressed as a compulsion to transform the other.

Therefore, the rationalist is driven to proffer balms of superstition-purging logic, as, in turn, the religious true-believer frets over the doomed-to-

eternal-damnation, mortal soul of the salvation-bereft rationalist.

Yet both causation-clutching logicians and credulous lambs of the Lord share this trait: both have banished from their respective belief system the appropriation of empathetic imagination and a poetic approach to mystery.

Accordingly, the ideal use of poetic insight, intellectual rigor, and quicksilver wit is to deploy these tools (at times, weapons) of the mind – in the manner the hubris-hating gods intended – to confront bullies, rednecks, liars, prigs and hypocrites (including our own self-serving casuistry), to disarm (or, at least, annoy) the brutal, conniving and witless, and, in general, paraphrasing Whitman, “to cheer up slaves and to horrify despots.”

Yet, today, if a poet were to merge his body with the body of America, instead of discovering a Body Electric, he would find himself endowed with the hulking, putrefying corpse of a shambling zombie.

Accordingly, he must tear a rotting arm from the monster and beat his own laughing corpse with it. Creating ... a movable autopsy ... a Book Of The Dead for a dying empire

Worse, in the world beyond U.S. self-reference, the earth’s oceans are dying – as, on a personal level, Fukushima’s isotopes penetrate our bones like parasitic beetles boring into the trunks of dying trees.

And this is not simply a view of the world. In fact, this is the state of the world.

Don’t defend the indefensible – the soul-defying banality of the present system. The neo-liberal super-state is unsustainable and will bring on its own demise.

Instead, like a mourner in a New Orleans funeral march, dance with the dread involved. The music of sorrow is more real than the magical thinking required to believe an insane system is salvageable.

Don’t stand, back pressed to the wall, frozen in rationalization and equivocation Exalt in the unfurling mystery of it all.

Crackpot realists demand solutions and Christian fundamentalists pray for finality. I demur. I stand in awe of the ragged glory immanent in sublime futility.

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.” Samuel

Beckett

I suspect this attitude arrives from the southerner/Native American collision of genes in me. One's broken places allow the spirit in. No need to fix the problem, for the problem is the solution. No call for satanic caulk to seal the cracks in one's soul that reveal one's character.

And why is this important, particularly, at a time when our opponents are unflagging in their certitude? Because even when our reason to fight has merit, and nuance is banished, the larger truth that life itself contains paradox and is comprised of ambiguity remains.

Thus, fascist fantasies of infallibility are toppled and the misguided trudge toward the mirage of paradise is waylaid ... perhaps leveling a measure of humanizing grace.

"None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.", Goethe

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## Fixing a Glitch on Comments

A number of readers had trouble making comments at the end of Consortiumnews.com stories, a glitch that came from the format we were using. We have switched to a different format that, we hope, should make commenting simpler. Our apologies for any frustrations caused by this problem.

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## The Why Behind the Gaza Mission

Former CIA analyst Ray McGovern has submitted these two YouTube videos to help explain why he considered challenging the Israeli blockade of Gaza as important enough to become a passenger on the U.S. boat named The Audacity of Hope.

The [first video](#) contains statements from the mission's participants and



supporters:

The [second video](#) shows the boat being stopped by the Greek coast guard.

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