

# — The roots of evil – Ch. 3

Transcription of the interview with Philip Zimbardo<sup>1</sup>

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## 3. Prison policy in the USA

### The Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal

"I believe that the prison guards at the Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq, [...] where prisoners were physically and psychologically abused, had surrendered their free will and personal responsibility during these episodes [...]. But I could not prove it in a court of law"

(P. Zimbardo, [Response to the 2005 Edge's Annual Question](#), in Edge.org, 2005)

### What does it mean?

The legal system is trying a person. They're not trying a situation or a system. What appears is an individual. The idea is you had the intelligence and the right and the wisdom to do a good thing or a bad thing, and you chose to do the bad thing. Therefore, we have to punish you so that you won't do it again. We want to make the punishment public as they used to do in the old time, put people in stock, so you would be an example for other people. Now we just put you in prison, because it's quicker and easier.

Essentially it's the whole legal system is based on individual choice that you made a decision with full awareness, and full freedom of choice to do a bad thing. Not a bad, an illegal thing. Therefore, our responsibility as a society is to punish you in the hope that it will change your behavior so you won't do it again.

Again, I'm saying...

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Philip Zimbardo, Psychologist, professor emeritus at Stanford University.

**"...this is wrong. It's a very old fashioned narrow view..."**

...that people go through life, "I decide this. I decide that". Again, as I said, poverty is in essence, one of the ultimate systemic evils, because when you're poor, you're forced to do things.

If you're rich you defraud your company or you sell bad products for big money. You still can do evil, but it's not at a level that ever gets punished. Again, in 2008, the economic crash that caused millions of people to lose their savings, their pension. We now know there are many people in high places in the government, in the judiciary, in America, in the Federal Reserve Bank, all who knew about this and have done nothing. No one was punished.

Just like in Abu Ghraib. Not a single senior officer was punished. Not a single senior officer got a Letter of Reprimand to say, "All of these bad things happened".

**What is the current situation of the US prison policy?**

It's worse now than ever. I mean when I did the prison study, I think after the study, I actually went to see the head of corrections in California. Ray Percunia and I said, "Here we did this study. Here's what we found. It has implications for how guards treat prisoners. We call it dehumanization. I would like to work with you free to be a consultant. My students would like to work in a prison. Help guards understand the psychological dynamics of their role". He said, "Oh good thanks". Never followed up. Never. I'm saying I'm going to do it for free and you can't even do research in prison.

I think in 1971 there were maybe 700,000 people in prison, now more than two millions. Every few years a judge will say, "Prisons are overcrowded, so we're going to release some prisoners". Small number. Release 10%. If the system is accepting it and society is accepting it by default. Saying...

**"...we don't care Too many other important things to think than to think about prisons"**

Now, the other problem is if you're a prisoner, when you get out, if you've served a felony, you can never get a job. You have a record. Now, you get out, you served your time. You were a good prisoner. You did nothing wrong. You didn't get into fights. You didn't join a gang, but you get out, there's no jobs. Nobody wants to hire prisoners, and also when you're in prison... I send you to prison for five years. What do you? You could learn computer programming. You could learn various skills. You could learn a foreign language. You could learn accounting. A lot of things you can learn. The pressure against teaching prisoners usable skills comes from the unions, because they don't want ex-convicts competing for jobs with their members.

You never learn a useful skill so when you get out, you're better than you went in. Now you're worse because...

**"...you lost these years. You lost contact with your family and you could have used that time to develop a skill and you have no new skills"**

What you learn in prison is your life is structured for you. Meaning, you get up at 6:00am, breakfast is at 7:00, finished by 7:30. Do this job, do this. Exercise. Do this, go to exercise room, come back. Lunch. Suddenly, you get used to an external structure organizing your life. Now you

get out of prison. It's not there. Meaning you can eat whenever you want if there's food. You can do this good. Many of the people I know who committed crimes, went back, really went back because it was comforting to have that structure. "I know what to do at each hour of the day because they tell me".

When you're in it, you rebel against it. When you're out you say, "You know, that was really good, because when I'm out alone, I didn't know what to do".

**"Twenty four hours is endless"**

*[to be continued]*