A Review of Mind Wars: Brain Research and National Defense
By Jonathan D. Moreno
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by
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"What we don't know is so much bigger than we are."
A Haitian Proverb

Oh, how I wish that reviewing a book like this were simple and straightforward! That would mean we live in a world of transparency, government accountability to citizens, easy access to sources, primary sources willing to go on the record, and data trails that lead readers to those same sources so everyone can see for themselves.

But alas, we do not live in such a world.

"Mind Wars" is a broad but necessarily incomplete overview of neuroscience, nanotechnology and related areas applied to the arts of war, with an examination of ethical issues raised by this work, all considered in a historical context by a scholar who has researched the field.

The key to decoding the book, however, is on page 4 of the introduction.

"I am no loose cannon," writes Jonathan D. Moreno, Ph. D., the Emilie Davie and Joseph S. Kornfeld Professor and Director of the Center for Biomedical Ethics at the University of Virginia. "I am deeply entrenched in the non-threatening, even boring, academic establishment. I've taught at major research universities, hold an endowed chair at an institution not known as a hotbed of radicalism …" and on the disclaimer goes, a plea to the reader to recognize that the author is no kook, no "conspiracy theorist," but a respectable, conventional man.

Moreno sounds those notes again, on p. 107, for example, when he states that he has considerable "experience with government—on the staffs of presidential advisory committees, in [giving] congressional testimony, and so forth."

Those qualifications define the subtext of this work and in many ways the subtext is the primary content. They also suggest one reason why the exploration of the frontiers of military research and development and the penetration of the military-industrial-academic-scientific-media complex is so difficult these days. Insiders know but can't tell; outsiders can tell, but don't often know, and when they do know, ridicule and other forms of disinformation can make what they know seem like fanciful speculation. So they err on the side of extreme caution.

Jonathan Moreno is qualified, without a doubt, to survey what is in the public domain about neuro-weapons and diverse applications of numerous branches of research that blur the distinctions between government, military, and medical, technological and scientific research, and he is also qualified to discuss the ethical implications of this research. So why does he need to insist that he is qualified? Because black budget (clandestinely funded) science and technology is so large a percentage of all scientific R&D and so hidden from public view that even to approach the subject is to enter a force

field of distortion and paranoia. One might as well explore UFOs or time travel—domains of actual research, in fact, but which must be discussed with a wink or, as Moreno's disclaimers indicate, the trumpeting of one's credentials, above all credentials of character—respectability and conventionality—so that one is not marginalized by the mere fact that one has chosen to explore the domain.

Inevitably, researchers of exotic technologies experience a condition called "strangeness," a kind of cognitive dissonance, and have to push against it to reestablish clear boundaries.

Why has this come about?

Because a national security state has evolved since World War 2 and is now the water in which we all swim. Moreno describes the history of that evolution and shows that a great deal of research, including research in the behavioral sciences, has been determined by a perception of military necessity. Access to the research is determined by the "need to know" and most readers of this book are "outsiders." Moreno himself is an insider of sorts, having served as an expert for numerous government venues, but his credibility depends on continued access and access depends on behaving rightly. Saying the right things in the right way defines correct behavior; hence disclaimers that distance him from fringe thinkers without institutional support or structural authority, like this reviewer.

Steven H. Miles, M.D., the author of "Oath Betrayed/Torture, Medical Complicity, and the War on Terror," states that he is often asked if he fears for his life because he discussed public documents, thirty five thousand pages of them, which reveal that medical complicity. That he is even asked such a question, Miles says, "is an epiphenomenon of being a torturing society. A torturing society is a society that is abraded by the process of dehumanization. In that process, we essentially create our own mirrored netherworlds."

A mirrored netherworld is exactly what is signified by Moreno's repeated insistence on credentials that ought to be obvious. His netherworld is a force field of distortion that attends any venture through the looking-glass of security clearances to explore areas that are exotic, dangerous, and mostly secret. That force field is an epiphenomenon of the national security state.

Moreno's history of post-WW2 research begins with identifying the transformation of America into a "garrison state," a nation that views the world as a dangerous place that requires the United States to project power everywhere in and increasingly out of the world to be secure. National Security Council document NSC-68, published in 1950, defined this strategy which is still pursued today. "It is mandatory that in building up our strength, we enlarge upon our technical superiority by an accelerated exploitation of the scientific potential of the United States and our allies," the document states. Currently, academic research receives several billion dollars a year, with MIT receiving half a billion, the largest single share. Much of the research is dual use, with commercial as well as military applications, but would not have been funded were it not for the latter.

"Mind Wars" surveys current research that has come to light. I was not surprised by any of the details of this book, although someone with less of a fetish for the subject might well be.

Moreno asks what novel ethical questions are raised by the emergence of new applications for war which will alter human identity by modifying memory, cognition, and core physical, emotional and spiritual capabilities. The enhancement of cognitive processes such as memory, for example, raises questions about why we evolved as we have. We forget things for good reasons—it is not helpful to be tormented, and our brains would be overwhelmed if we remembered everything, including masses of irrelevant data. Near-total recall would pose new problems as would enhancement of affective processes related to religious experience—e.g., how many mystics do we need? Evolution of the species suggests that a few mystics per thousand are plenty. But if genetic, chemical, and technological enhancements can trigger mystical experiences, might too many people bliss out in ecstatic contemplation of the One? Would too many of us become mice pressing buttons connected to pleasure centers and die happily rather than eat? Would enhancements of memory and cognition give an unfair advantage to the children of the rich much as steroids give big-headed baseball players the ability to hit the long ball?

Moreno was hampered in his research because many scientists "clammed up" when asked about their work which means that we can only speculate about many of the projects. Their silence means that while we know we don't know, we don't know what we don't know. Hence, cognitive dissonance.

That dissonance never left as I read this book. It's what happens when I read the fiction of Philip K. Dick. Dick no longer reads like speculative science fiction smacking of paranoia because the landscape he describes is the world we now inhabit, a moebius-strip world in which distortions feed back into the perception of everyday life. The world we encounter in "Mind Wars" is like the world in Dick's "A Scanner Darkly," in which a policeman discovers that the subject he pursues is himself. In "Mind Wars," Moreno is a participant in the world he describes as well as an objective observer; the edge of the glass curves and returns a distorted image.

His own emotions, for example, when he communicates the shock of certain discoveries, transform his feelings into subject matter the reader must consider. He communicates his surprise when he learned that Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, participated in "a Harvard study aimed at psychic deconstruction by humiliating undergraduates and thereby causing them to experience severe stress." (p. 69) Moreno does not simplistically attribute all of Kaczynski's behaviors to this event, but he does speculate on the impact of "a psychological experiment that … involved psychological torment and humiliation that could have left deep scars" over a period of three years.

I had a similar reaction when I learned of a formative episode in the life of Donald Defreeze, a.k.a. Cinque, leader of the Symbionese Liberation Army. DeFreeze and other members of the SLA kidnapped Patty Hearst and subjected her to brainwashing using classical mind control techniques. It is seldom asked how DeFreeze learned to brainwash so effectively. Colin A. Ross, M.D. in "Bluebird," a study of the deliberate creation of multiple personalities, notes that DeFreeze, while an inmate at Vacaville State Prison, was "a subject in an experimental behavior modification program run by Colston Westbrook, a CIA psychological warfare expert and advisor to the Korean CIA." (Bluebird, p.212). Westbrook returned to the United States from working undercover in Viet Nam and "entered Vacaville State Prison under cover of the Black Cultural

Association and there designed the seven-headed cobra logo of the SLA and gave DeFreeze his African name, Cinque." (Bluebird, p. 212)

The accounts of both Kaczinski and DeFreeze suggest that their crimes might have been "blowback," unintended consequences of covert intelligence operations that rebound on perpetrators.

If those accounts were not public, however, and we speculated in that vein about DeFreeze and Kaczinski, it would be easy to dismiss our speculation as "conspiracy theories" or sloppy thinking. We know those two accounts are not the only experiments that might have backfired, but prudence suggests we not extrapolate from the known data, lest we be ridiculed. That's what respectability in a world of strangeness requires. But in light of those accounts, it is not unreasonable to ask, what other rough beasts have slouched out of covert research to be born?

So there is often a disconnect between the history that we know and discussions of current research sanitized by willful innocence. This is crazy-making. I understand why Moreno does not want to be found on the wrong side of the looking glass. Yet Moreno wrote an excellent history of how "informed consent" evolved from the horrors of our own history. There is a parallax view of the stick of history which enters the water but seems to be discontinuous rather than a straight line. The distance of a historical account disinfects the moral dimension of events; we may be shocked when we read of the torturous experiments of Ewen Cameron and Sidney Gottleib, for example, doctors who participated in MKULTRA, a series of CIA experiments with hallucinogenic drugs, electric shock, and sensory deprivation, but because those experiments ended in the seventies, they read like scripts for a horror movie instead of a daily newspaper.

Moreno's discussion of ethical issues is similarly sanitized and sane, appropriate to the seminar room on a college campus, with its warmth, light, and comfortable chairs, but far from the trenches in which experiments takes place. His calls for accountability sound eminently reasonable but are theoretical and abstract because the details we need in order to explore ethical implications in a real historical context, one with flesh-and-blood men and women feeling real emotions, are hidden in darkness.

As a result, readers remain outsiders because we do not "need to know." We learn afterward some of what has taken place, when details filter into the light of ordinary day, but the ethical imperatives of a quickened public conscience can not be applied retroactively. The secret deeds are already done.

The technology of hypersonic sound (HSS) illustrates how the worlds of scientific researchers and outsiders bifurcate, creating an epistemological divide when we outsiders try to understand what is happening on a basic level.

Hypersonic sound is "a column of sound that does not spread out like conventional sound but stays locked like a sonic laser." (p. 147). If you enter the column, you hear it, but outside it, you do not. HSS can be used to target individuals while ensuring that those around them hear nothing.

It does not take a devious mind to imagine a variety of uses for hypersonic sound, nor to imagine its misuse, even as a trivial amusement. Some accounts of HSS describe pedestrians on sunny days walking into a column of sound in which they hear a waterfall. Seconds later, the sound is gone. The demonstrator laughed, watching the non-consenting public try to puzzle out experiences for which they had no prior frame.

More pernicious uses of the technology suggest themselves. At the siege of Waco, David Koresh of the Branch Davidians reported hearing voices in his head. He was crazy, we are told. But without the key pieces to the puzzle … how do we know?

Moreno states that he has spoken for years with people who claim to have been targeted by this or similar technologies which put voices into their heads or use them unknowingly to test beam, particle and electromagnetic weapons. I have spoken to such people, too.

Yes, hearing voices that are not there is a symptom of illness. But hearing a voice that no one else hears does not mean, now that we know about HSS, that the voices do not exist.

Enter strangeness once again. Moreno concludes that the claims of these people are not credible. But Moreno had already reviewed by that point in the discussion the abuse of medical and psychological testing by intelligence professionals in the past.

We know about those earlier experiments only because CIA Director Richard Helm's order in 1973 to destroy all documents related to MKULTRA were carried out—except for financial documents stored in obscure places. Had they known those boxes existed, they too would have been destroyed, but because they were overlooked, researchers could connect some dots, at least, and describe a maze of funding sources, dummy companies fronting for intelligence agencies, and significant numbers of respectable medical establishments funded in whole or in part by the CIA.

The parallax view.

So here's the dilemma: Secret experiments were carried out by well-intentioned patriots working under the cover of security who tortured non-consenting adults, then covered up the events. There was no transparency or outside accountability for what they did. The same kinds of people today authorize experiments and weapons testing, and in the absence of accountability, they too report only to themselves. The light from inside bends back at the surface and we see only a black hole.

Had Moreno spoken to victims of MKULTRA and related projects in the fifties or sixties, before those documents were discovered, had he heard people subjected to electroshock therapy or drugs or isolation who told him in horrendous detail what had been done to them, don't you think he would have made the same statement? That the sane conventional respectable response by a man of the establishment would be that they were deluded?

So why are such claims today unworthy of investigation?

Because to conduct such investigations in the absence of transparency, accountability, and meaningful legislative oversight is to subject oneself to ridicule and career suicide.

An aside about hypersonic sound … John Alexander, the author of "Future War," told me that a major motivation for developing hypersonic sound was to communicate with covert agents in dangerous places. Someone about to be taken down can not answer a cell phone call but can attend to a voice in the head that tells them to "get out now."

Moreno doesn't mention that application—not a serious flaw, but an indicator that one depends on one's sources for this sort of research and many of Moreno's sources are unnamed. Moreno has confidence in them, as I often do in mine, but without an objective way to evaluate what they say … *How do we know?*

That question is left on the table when we finish this book. “Mind Wars” surveys much of what has become public about military applications of brain and mind science and reviews the historical context. Ethical issues are articulated at length. But in the end, what we don’t know is still much larger than what we do know.

The national security state, with millions of classified documents and billions of dollars in black research, freezes the average citizen out of the loop. Like enemies, real and imagined, we do not “need to know.” Classification, of course, covers mistakes and malfeasance and protects political bases in addition to ensuring security. So we ought to feel uneasy when we finish this book. “Mind Wars” is not an antidote to “strangeness.” We can’t blame Dr. Moreno, who wants doors to continue to open, calls to be returned. But our dissonance persists. We don’t know what we don’t know, only that those who do know ask us to trust.

Trust, yes, but verify, as the old Cold Warrior said. If it was good enough for him, it ought to be good enough for us.

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