

The Politics of Torture: Dispelling the Myths and Understanding the Survivors

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Torture has been known throughout the ages and is indeed an ancient practice. However, it is a modern paradox that the systemic and widespread use of torture today is unprecedented, at the same time that it is so widely prohibited by international measures. The United Nations 1948 **Declaration of Human Rights** states clearly that no-one should be subjected to torture. It remains one of the few rights which may not be derogated: there can be no justification for torture nor mitigating circumstances for its practice. Subsequent United Nations instruments include the 1975 **Declaration Against Torture** and the 1984 **Convention Against Torture**. Yet Amnesty International describes torture as the twentieth century epidemic and reports that it is employed in more than a hundred countries. From 1982-1994, the **Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture** has documented the histories of 8000 survivors from 75 countries.

Understanding the modern use of torture entails the dispelling of myths about its nature and purpose. There remains a perception that torture is practiced randomly, that it is punishment carried to an extreme, that it is performed by psychopaths or sadists, that it exists outside of governmental responsibility and is practiced by "less civilized" societies. Compounding the problem is a wall of sustained disbelief that prevents full comprehension of the enormity of this gross human rights violation. Most people simply try to avoid the topic entirely.

The Goals of Torture

Common misconceptions about torture do not hold up to evidence obtained from human rights organizations, international monitoring agencies, and documented testimonies of survivors, which suggest a more sinister scenario. While torture may be utilized for a variety of purposes (for example, to punish, to obtain information, or to coerce a third party), a primary reason for its use is as a means of social control. Governments employ torture as part of state policy in order to deter real or suspected dissidents. Regimes use torture as part of a continuum of repressive measures and suppression of democratic rights. Rarely, if ever, is torture practiced alone; it has become a constituent part of mechanisms for domination.

Torture is not intended to kill the body, but the soul. Doctors and medical personnel participate during torture sessions so as to ensure that the victim will live long enough for the strategy to be effective. Khmer Rouge documents compiled by David Hawk of the Cambodia Documentation Commission underscore this point. The Tuol Sleng Prison Interrogator's Manual states that torture is used

"...to break them [psychologically] and to make them lose their will. It's not something that's done out of individual anger, or for self-satisfaction. Thus we beat them to make them afraid but absolutely not to kill them. When torturing it is necessary to examine their state of health first and necessary to examine the whip."

These cold words betray a great deal. The practice of torture is shown to be a conscious effort, accompanied by methodological standards. While there is no doubt that there are torturers who are drawn to the trade because they are sadists, most perpetrators are not. They are part of a larger apparatus of terror that can act to shield them from the consequences of their actions. The state's involvement provides adequate authorization and even a measure of justification. The author of the Khmer Rouge's training manual is exposed as a technocratic functionary. A film co-produced by Amnesty International and which depicts how "ordinary" recruits were trained to become torturers during the Colonels' junta in Greece, is aptly entitled *"Your Neighbor's Son"*.

Continuing 'Refinement' of Methods

The methods used in torture cannot be described dispassionately. In the process of attempting to break an individual, the most degrading, humiliating and painful techniques are used. Survivor testimonies disclose examples of prolonged beatings, sensory deprivation or overload, electric shocks, mutilation of body parts, starvation, sham executions, denigration and threats, sexual molestation and rape. Often common objects or available material are used as instruments of torture - pencils, cigarettes, water, fire, animals. Prisoners are forced to witness the torture of friends or family, including children. Interrogation occurs simultaneously with the physical torment. The listing of types and techniques of torture does not adequately express the horror of the reality.

Torturers continue to devise diabolic methods for torturing. Technological advances intended to better human life, are employed for its detriment when torturers use scientific means to monitor how long a human being can endure the electric shocks. They have grown calculated in their efforts to conceal the evidence of their crimes. In the 1970s, physicians were able to recognize physical signs left after electric shocks. Two decades later, torturers have mastered the technique to the point where such scars can rarely be detected.

The **United Nations Declaration of Human Rights** has universal application. But human rights belong to human beings. People who are tortured are rendered less than human by their violators. They may be characterized as animals, subversives, infidels, unbelievers, "the other". They are an enemy to be defeated and, therefore, anything can (and should) be done to them. It is the task of the torturer to induce his victims to agree.

There is no solace in the misconception that "others"; that is, people different than ourselves practice torture. It is a contemporary tragedy to recognize that modern torture has occurred on every continent and employed within regimes of both the left and the right. Barely one decade after the Nazi Holocaust in Europe, France was using torture in Algeria. European examples abound; at various times torture has been systematically employed in Greece, Spain, Portugal, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union, as well being used by British authorities in Northern Ireland. Press reports demonstrate that gross human rights violations have transpired in Sri Lanka, Iran, South Africa, Somalia, Zaire, Chile, Guatemala and the former Yugoslavia. Less notorious regimes promulgate torture without the glare of media lights.

Practice of Torture Breeds Circles of Silence

The practice of torture may be widespread but it must not be viewed as inherent to modern life. However routine atrocities seem to have become, they remain atrocities. It is critical to recognize that it is the use of torture which is the aberrant behaviour. However, the intentional use of terror generates defensive reactions in people and "cognitive dissonance" develops. When torture is practiced as official policy with the calculated purpose of precipitating fear, social reality becomes distorted. Because torture is practiced in secret and its use is always denied, truth is perverted and devalued. Ignacio Martin-Baro, the Jesuit psychologist who was assassinated by the Salvadoran military in November 1989, described the phenomenon of "circles of silence" that are created as a direct consequence of the social denial surrounding massive repression. A progressive distancing occurs which transposes the authentic situation from immediate overt consciousness.

A significant byproduct of massive human rights abuse is the manufacture of "cultures of fear". The trauma induced by gross human rights violations produces ruptures in communities by creating victims, bystanders and perpetrators. This dislocation feeds on the fear intentionally created by those promulgating the violence. "Circles of silence" enclose the victims who have been rendered as others without recourse to justice, also the bystanders who fear repercussions, and the perpetrators who conceal the crimes.

Martin-Baro writes that gross violations of human rights are "experiences that affect a whole population, not only as individuals but as social beings in a social context. Social trauma affects individuals precisely in their social character; that is, as a totality, as a system. What is left traumatized is German society or Palestinian society, not simply Germans or Palestinians." Still, in any listing of countries and of statistics, it is significant to remember that it is individuals who are tortured and it is the victims who directly suffer the consequences.

No Typical Profile

Torture is a life altering circumstance. Individuals who have survived are faced with the fact that their lives are in fact altered. The fact that people do survive is a testament to the human spirit and its resiliency. While there are consequences, there is not (and cannot be) a 'typical' profile of a torture survivor. Too many modifying and diverse elements factor into the equation for a viable profile to be constructed. Culture, belief systems, age, gender, social and family support (or lack thereof), and individual personality, all combine to influence the recovery process. Survivors must be recognized as more than a sum of the torture experience.

However, certain similar elements in the aftermath of the torture experience can be characterized. The physical effects can include pain, broken or poorly healed bones, teeth and gum disease, damage to heart, kidneys, lungs, spine, ears, eyes, gynecological problems, and an abundance of localized disorders. There is a need to determine the long term physical consequences of torture so that better treatment and assessment procedures can be made available.

Still, the physical scars may heal more readily than the psychological ones. The sheer life-threatening aspect to torture involves a reaction, a normal of response to an abnormal situation which can be classified within the designation of post traumatic stress. This term refers to a constellation of psychological consequences which may include anxiety, depression, survivor guilt, sleep disturbances and nightmares, impaired use or loss of memory, concentration difficulties, hyperarousal, hypersensitivity, suspiciousness, fear of authority and paranoia. Many of these barriers to recovery are the result of the mechanisms used to survive the ordeal of violent persecution. For example, during interrogation, it may have been necessary to forget information or names. Disassociation can be helpful in enduring torture and incarceration, as holocaust survivors who have survived long years of imprisonment in concentration camps have attested. Paranoia and suspicion could provide protection from further persecution.

If myths abound concerning the practice of torture, then they are often compounded in consideration of survivors. The effects of torture are so pernicious that survivors are frequently viewed as being unalterably damaged. While the experience does produce permanent consequences, people who have been tortured have revealed enormous reserves of resiliency. Individuals have learned coping mechanisms and with support and recognition have been able to proceed with their lives.

A Community Approach to Rehabilitation

In efforts to provide assistance to torture survivors, it is important to recognize and validate what has happened. People who have been tortured have had their lives radically changed, but in many circumstances justice has been denied them. Indeed, the fact that torture is universally denounced has not prevented the perpetrators from going unpunished. Survivors live in a world where torture is prohibited, but not prevented. In many instances, the reality of torture is not only unacknowledged, but denied. In efforts to assist, then, it is helpful to provide a framework for support which includes the following considerations: If the aim of torture is to isolate and break human beings, we can begin to assist by incorporating models of community support which prevent further isolation of the victims. Support programmes which acknowledge the totality of the experience and take into consideration all factors which can influence recovery have been found to be useful. Integrated, holistic programmes acknowledge that individuals may need specialized assistance. They also help survivors to cope with practical needs arising from resettlement, which have a profound impact on their lives.

Equally important is the recognition that social denial of the practice of torture can extend into the host community. Martin-Baro's "circles of silence" can affect the manner in which survivors are treated in countries of asylum. In "bystander" societies, victims of torture can remain segregated from the host community. Individualized treatment or therapy aimed at resolving the "problem" of torture victims can reinforce the perception that the problem is the survivor and not the practice of torture. Community-based programmes, which involve and integrate care-givers, survivors and members of the community, break down partitions which recreate separation. Our challenge is to construct and implement approaches which establish connections between "victims" and "bystanders". In so doing, we will be able to realize Martin-Baro's hope for circles of solidarity, as an antidote to circles of silence. This is a vital step towards negating both the goals that motivate torture, as well as its after effects.