The Politics of Pain: Torturers and their Masters
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Reviewed by Brian Martin

What is there to know about torture, aside from that it's a terrible thing that should be stopped? Actually, quite a lot. That doesn't mean there aren't useful ways to think about torture. It's important to understand what torture is and how it is organized socially and politically. In this article, I explore the concept of torture and its institutionalization, focusing on the state's role in perpetuating torture.

In Australia, there are occasional instances of torture, but no organized system. In nearby countries, there are torture systems. Most torture occurs in an organized fashion, in an institutional context.

The central rationale for torture is a perceived or actual threat of violence against the state. Torture is a tool of state control. Numerous survivors of torture can tell about their experiences, but very few torturers or authorities ever give their view of any problem. Several contributors to The Politics of Pain have collected first-hand accounts from torturers or interviewed responsible military officials. This information provides insight into the making of a torture system.

There are cases from Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua under Somoza, and Uruguay.

The torture is carrying out a job. There are clear expectations about what it takes to do the job well. The aim is to obtain results, either confessions or breaking the will of the victim. The method used is pain. Torture is carried out against those who are considered enemies. Details about the techniques used are complex, but there is a central idea of control. There are planners and builders to construct the torture chambers, and there are arrest squads to bring in the subjects.

No-one is born a torturer. Those who become torturers carefully select those who are in an arduous training process, which may involve torture of the recruits. The training breaks down previous identities and builds up a new world view in which those to be tortured are not human. Yet everyone has everyday reasons for becoming a torturer. For example, a soldier may want to live closer to home and join a torture group in order to do so.

Torture thrives in situations where there is large-scale violence, such as war and genocide. An armed opposition movement, in the case of guerrillas in Latin America, has made torture by the army more likely. Military authorities from countries with torture systems report that they use them to cooperate with other countries. The lack of capability to deal with guerillas and to the need to exact information concerning guerrillas. Courts, judicial officials and their families also seem to increase the use of torture. This suggests that if challenges use non-violent methods, this is less likely to trigger the development or expansion of torture systems.

One factor not mentioned in this book is gender. Almost without exception, torturers are men, usually quite young. Masculinity, violence and obedience are closely linked together in torture systems. Much more research is needed on this link. Only one of the nine contributors to this volume is a woman.

The most important thing to do to help stop torture is simply to speak up against it. This applies especially in countries in which it occurs, but outsiders can do a lot as well. Campaigns by Amnesty International and other human rights groups do have an impact.

Unfortunately, most people are simply bystanders. Many have an unconscious belief that the world is just, if people are tortured, then they must be guilty of something. This is certainly not the case. Many victims caught up in torture systems do not even know why they are there. In any case, torture can never be justified in a humane society.

Just because all governments officially re-"none torture is no reason to be compliant. The problem is hidden but serious. Torture is unpleasant even to think about, but it deserves much more attention, both research and action.

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