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Book Review: The psychological origins of institutionalized torture

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Title: A Commentary on Torture

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Abstract: The author reviewed Mika Haritos-Fatouros's book *The psychological origins of institutionalized torture*, commenting on torture itself and how it relates to the human condition.

Review of Haritos-Fatouros, M. (2003). *The psychological origins of institutionalized torture*. London, UK: Routledge.

One might think torture is becoming an ever more frequent phenomenon in the last 165 years based on a frequency count of publications with torture in the Title or abstract from the American Psychological Association's PsycINFO database. On March 25, 2005, a Quick Search found 39 journal articles between 1840 and 1973, 28 journal articles between 1974 and 1984, 189 journal articles between 1985 and 1995, and 300 journal articles from 1996 to the present. (In the last 165 years, there also were 25 doctoral dissertations, 37 books, and 174 book chapters—the latter coming mostly from the 37 books.)

No doubt there has been other work bearing on some element of a biopsychosocial or of a socio-historical perspective on torture that has been missed by PsycINFO. And some of the PsycINFO sources include only figurative and lyrical usages of torture—e.g., Titles "A schizophrenic illness described as indescribable severe torture," "Proust and the 'torture-theory' of love," and [the body's torture, value, and needs within power relationships of] "Pina Bausch and the Wuppertal Dance Theater: Repetition and transformation." Nevertheless, the phenomenon of an increasing frequency of torture publications remains to be explicated—with inferences bearing on the increase of torture as phenomenon explicated as well.

Some inferences might include that torture is, indeed, increasing in frequency; that torture is increasing not in frequency but in severity; that torture is increasing neither in frequency or severity but as a more salient Issue bearing moral, ethical, and even entertainment value; that relationships between publications on torture and torture are causally reciprocal, epiphenomenal, intermediary, mediating, or variously time-lagged; that torture may be an ever more useful screen for even more evil, exploitation, atrocity in the world; that torture is ever more instrumentally effective in the securing of valued goals; and even that torture is somehow expiating and purifying and can be conceived positively as means and as ends. However, continuing with ever more grandiose musings of intellectual flight risks an Icarus-like demise through the ignoring of torture's physical, psychological, and spiritual damage that are reported by many who are tortured and by some who torture.

Reading through the PsycINFO sources, one would note that virtually all respective authors advocate that torture is bad not good; may well be evil; is infrequent among all the possible human behaviors in all possible situations; and can be, may be, or should be eradicated. And in the quest to eradicate torture, most authors begin by citing its putative origins.

In the 165-year span covered by PsycINFO, these authors have demonstrated significant differences concerning torture's psychological and social psychological origins. Some authors have asserted the unusualness of the person of the individual torturer and advance dispositional hypotheses. Of these

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dispositions, most are conceived as pathological or as merely statistically deviant imbued with negativity. Of these dispositions, some have been assumed to be robust causal factors irrespective of situational factors, while others have been assumed to become malignant through interaction with some situational press. Occasionally, blameworthy dispositions are viewed as positive but contributing to negative consequences.

In contrast, some authors have asserted the unusualness of specific situations. These situations may have been malignant in and of themselves and may have been “one-shot” experiences, periods of special training, or historical moments. In fact, there is a variation in levels of analysis from the discrete stimuli impinging only on an individual to grand socio-historical manifestations of the long durée. Such situations also may have been assumed not to become malignant without some dispositional press.

A third perspective encompasses interactions of person and situation variables and values. This interaction usually involves static as opposed to dynamic variables and values and ignores interpretation of a situations, cognitive scripts and narratives, and heuristics for identifying specific person and characteristics from an infinite population of each.

With the accumulation of data and the consolidation of empirically based theory has come a contemporary consensus that there may be nothing special about most torturers—except as the perpetrators of torture—but something special about people who do not commit torture when exposed to unusual situations that too often are associated with torture.

This brings us to Dr. Mika Haritos-Fatouros, Professor of Psychology at the University of Thessalonica, Greece, and The psychological origins of institutionalized torture. Her book is a volume within the Routledge Research International Series in Social Psychology and is excellent in at least four ways. First, it presents powerful accounts of the selection and training of torturers, of torture, and of the aftermath of torture on its perpetrators—government sanctioned torturers during the Greek colonels’ dictatorship of 1967-1974. Second, it also describes empirically supported psychological and social psychological theories on the origins, maintenance, and possible eradication of institutionalized torture. Third, it validates the contemporary consensus of the specialness of people who do not engage in torture when exposed to unusual situations that too often are associated with torture. Finally, it implicitly suggests a direction for future research by citing a few other social phenomena that constitute persons, situations, dispositions towards assuming specific social roles, and behaviors that respectively appear to be isomorphically parallel with primary causal factors of torture, intermediary causal factors of torture, and torture itself—e.g., college hazing, military training, and classes of developmental rites of passage.

However one morally and ethically views military experience, the college experience, or developmental rites of passage, the idea that they in some ways look like portions of a sequence from distal causal factors implicated in torture to torture itself is provocative. Even more provocative is the notion that there may be yet other social phenomena also implicated. In fact, a sociogenic bad seed may be planted in at least some of the most desired and coveted ground of humanity, just as the potential for torture resides within most of us. And with sociogenic bad seed and potential for torture taking up an expanding portion of the life sphere, the quest for the can/may/should of torture eradication becomes more problematic.

Thus, Haritos-Fatouros and others in the forefront of torture research need to go further, for it may well be that the origins of torture constitute and the very essence of the human are inseparable. Getting rid of one gets rid of the other. This state of affairs—as ontologically sound physical and psychological

reality or as high-utility narrative—may be a lesson of postmodern analyses of psychology and of power. For there may be ineluctable tensions between and among conceptual opposites in phenomenology and in social discourse; between and among the privileging and subjugating of humanity through these tensions; and between and among the piercings of bodies, minds, and souls not only through physical punishment but also through the invasive and intrusive gaze of our multiple selves and of the external world. Even more insidiously, capturing the facts of torture—again as physical and material reality or as narrative—is like gazing into a mirror. And if the mirror shatters, so do we.

Even with the pain and anguish of torture that surely cry out for compassion and compassionate activism in many of us, the following needs to be said. There are metatheoretical assumptions of history and of value that may cloud clear thinking on torture and on the quest for its eradication even among the best of researchers and commentators. These assumptions include the possibility of a new history of the future with torture nearly absent. These assumptions include torture as a malignancy alien to health or as a common disease susceptibility that may remain unenergized through judicious, applied research. Ultimately, these assumptions portray humanity as good or as potentially good according to self-actualization, humanistic strivings, benign sociality, and other reified and centering constructs around which ideologies and myths are spun.

Unfortunately, there is at least one human penchant that dares not speak its name. Torture is us and will remain so as long as we exist. And that is torture indeed.

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