

The genealogy of torture

Torture and Democracy by Darius Rejali

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Torture and Democracy, *Darius Rejali, Princeton University Press: 2007, 880 pp., \$39.50*

The horrifying scenes of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and the mistreatment of detainees at the US concentration camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba have brought the issue of the officially sanctioned state use of torture into the international spotlight.

The widespread employment of torture by US military and intelligence agencies has been accompanied by an unrelenting assault on democratic rights at home. The “war on terror” has been used to justify warrantless wiretaps, detention without charges and other attacks on constitutional rights. The Bush administration, with the complicity of the US Congress, has asserted virtually dictatorial power, proclaiming its right to seize and hold indefinitely anyone it deems an “enemy combatant.”

Darius Rejali, in his recently published book *Torture and Democracy*, documents the continued widespread employment of torture. He provides a meticulously detailed account of the use of torture techniques by both authoritarian and bourgeois democratic governments from the Spanish Inquisition to the present. He reaches the conclusion that the so-called industrial democracies, the United States, Britain, and France in particular, have been responsible for developing and exporting a large portion of the torture techniques currently employed throughout the world.

Rejali, an Iranian-American, is a professor at Reed College in Portland, Oregon and is regarded as a leading expert on the torture issue and its consequences for society. He has authored several previous works on the topic, including, *Torture and Modernity: Self, State and Society in Iran*.

The author’s principal thesis is that the rise of human rights monitoring since the 1970s has not reduced the use of torture, but merely driven regimes that practice torture to utilize “clean” methods that are more difficult to detect. He points in particular to the rise of electro-torture and stun technology as indicative of this trend.

Rejali is sharply critical of apologists for the US use of torture. He rebuts claims that so called “harsh interrogation” techniques defended by Bush administration lawyers—including forced standing, hooding, starvation, thirst, mind-altering drugs, and sleep deprivation, among others—do not constitute torture. He demonstrates that similar methods were denounced when employed by foreign governments against US soldiers, for example by Japan and Germany during WWII.

As for the CIA practice of waterboarding, Rejali points out that it is a torture technique dating back to the seventeenth century that later found its way to the US via soldiers returning from the Philippine War.

He notes, “The limitations placed on the CIA’s ‘enhanced interrogations’ are almost identical to those imposed by Gestapo chief Muller in 1943 on the Gestapo’s ‘sharpened interrogation’” (p. 503).

Rejali correctly points out that the use of torture is not simply an issue relating to the treatment of prisoners captured during America’s overseas military interventions. He notes the long history of torture techniques, e.g., electric cattle prods, the so-called third degree, etc., employed by police departments on prisoners in the United States, citing for example the recent police torture case in New York City involving Abner Louima. He warns that torture techniques learned by US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan will eventually show up in American policing.

He strongly opposes equipping police with stun guns and tasers because the misuse of these devices on prisoners is difficult to detect, making them ideal torture devices.

Rejali also rebuts the reactionary and ignorant arguments put forward by Zionist apologist Alan Dershowitz and others who favor so-called torture warrants. He points out that there is no documented case of torture uncovering a “ticking bomb,” and that torture is more likely to produce unreliable information than other forms of intelligence. Further, he argues that torturers always go beyond the approved methods.

Rejali’s work, however, is marred overall by an apolitical approach, which treats the question of torture in an abstract manner, largely separate from the policy aims and class interests of the regimes that employ it.

While documenting the continued pervasive use of torture, despite legal prohibitions, from local police departments to state security agencies, Rejali is unable to draw any significant conclusions about what this says about the character of US society. This is in no small part due to the fact that he uncritically accepts the premises behind the so-called “war on terror” that are being used to justify the atrocities committed by the United States and other imperialist powers.

The author treats Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo as though they were unrelated to the assault on democratic rights within the United States. Further, he makes no critical assessment of the character of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, thus implicitly

accepting the premises behind these reactionary neo-colonial adventures.

The book makes for difficult reading. The author adopts a detached, academic, almost matter-of-fact approach in describing some of the most horrific human abuses, cataloging the history of every known torture technique and its usage by country. While this certainly required a huge amount of research, the accumulation of such a mass of detail ultimately ends up numbing the reader and detracting significantly from the overall impact of the book.

One reviewer suggested the book could serve as sort of a torture manual. While this undoubtedly was not the intention of the author, one wonders if all this detail was necessary to support his contentions.

One of the conclusions drawn by Rejali is that torture is a craft, passed on by individual torturers, and not a science. He advances this thesis as a rebuttal to claims by American radical academic Noam Chomsky that the US Central Intelligence Agency has acted as the principal distributor of torture techniques during the last half of the twentieth century.

However, whatever its precise role in spreading specific torture techniques, there is no doubt that the CIA has assisted right-wing client regimes that employ torture, especially in Latin America. Rejali's rebuttal of Chomsky thus appears insincere, aimed more at distancing himself from a left-wing critique of US imperialism than in adding to public understanding about torture.

On page 22, he asks rhetorically, "How is it that democracy and torture can coexist?" But he does not ask the more pertinent question, "What is the state of American democracy under conditions where the ruling authorities openly assert their right to practice torture in defiance of domestic laws and international conventions?"

He explicitly rejects a class-based analysis of society, dismissing what he terms the "ruling elite hypothesis," which argues that "democratic states are ruled by an elite who, for whatever reason, want to hide their exploitative state in the guise of a genuinely democratic government" (p. 411).

In essence, the book is a plea to state authorities to recognize that torture is not in their best interest. The author argues that torture is ineffective, corrupting and demoralizing. He writes: "In the broadest sense, this book offers states good reasons to avoid torturing prisoners.... [I]nstitutionalized torture is the farthest thing from political realism; indeed, it is downright foolish in some cases. The most effective ways of exercising violence and gathering information depend on public cooperation or at least willing informants" (p. 26).

In this regard, Rejali pays a great deal of attention to the experience of the French in Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s. Of the French battle against the Algerian anti-colonial insurgency he writes, "What is important here is that democratic institutions were unwilling or unable to stop the turn to torture. One after another the judicial system, the legislature, the opposition parties and the press failed ... the consequences for France were severe. In 1958, the army threatened to intervene in national politics for the first time since Napoleon's coup of eighteenth Brumaire, leading to the collapse of the Fourth Republic. In 1961 the army finally did organize a putsch and failed" (p. 47).

In an interview in the February 2008 edition of *Magazine* he writes, "As I show in *Torture and Democracy*, the Battle of Algiers turned in favor of the French only after Paul Aussaresses, who ran the torture policy, was replaced by the very smart and canny Col. Yves Godard, and it was his informants, not Aussaresses' torture policy, that gave the French the big breaks they needed. Godard knew how intelligence really worked."

In the same interview he calls it a "hopeful" sign that so far "clean" methods of torture are being employed because it means "government leaders know that people are watching."

By implication, what Rejali is proposing then are "clean" colonial wars where the occupiers exercise restraint and balanced judgment. But the author does not cite examples because none exist.

How is it that state torture, a relic of medieval barbarism, flourishes in the twenty-first century? In Chapter Two the author advances a series of "models" to explain why purportedly democratic states like the US practice torture: for information, for confessions and as a means of intimidation. But the author evades the main point. While it is true that the US and other Western democracies have covertly practiced torture in the past, what is new is that the US ruling class now openly embraces and defends these methods. The sanction of torture and other wholesale violations of democratic principles, such as suspension of the right of habeas corpus, are unprecedented in the history of the United States.

Behind the breakdown of the constitutional rule of law is the staggering growth of social inequality in the United States and globally. The US is a society so polarized along class lines that democratic forms of rule are breaking down. The top 1 percent of the US population controls 34.3 percent of the net worth of all households and 20 percent of all income. By contrast, the poorest 40 percent controls just .2 percent of wealth.

The United States incarcerates more of its own people than any other country in the world, 1.6 million or about 1 out of every 100 US adults. In 2007 it was fifth in the world behind China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the number of executions.

The intensification of the assault on democratic rights is also bound up with the turn to military aggression and conquest overseas by the US corporate establishment. The attempt to seize the resources of the oil-rich Middle East and subjugate the people of the region requires the use of massive violence. It requires the suppression of opposition to this agenda within the United States as well.

Thus, no amount of moral appeals or attempts to apply pressure to the ruling authorities can reverse the trend toward the suppression of civil liberties, including the open sanction of torture. The defense of democratic rights is bound up with a fight against the source of social inequality and war, which is the capitalist profit system itself.



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