

# Stealth Torture and Democratic Government

A Review of *Torture and Democracy* by Darius Rejali. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 880, ISBN: 978-1-4008-3087-9, Pbk £20.95.

By Vanessa Freije

Darius Rejali's thoughtful and well-researched *Torture and Democracy* traces the migration of "clean torture" techniques, defined as physical torture that leaves no evidence on the victims' bodies, from western democracies to authoritarian regimes since the 1970s. Through the exacting consultation of military and police torture manuals in over ten languages, Rejali dispels the notion, already weakened considerably in the wake of Abu Ghraib, that democracies do not torture. Rejali argues that "clean" or "stealth" torture was developed first in the democracies of France, the United States, and Britain over the past two hundred years. Rejali concludes that the presence of public monitoring and a free press in democracies has led leaders to opt for torture techniques that cannot be traced. He writes, "Public monitoring leads institutions that favor painful coercion to use and combine clean torture techniques to evade detection, and, to the extent that public monitoring is not only greater in democracies, but that public monitoring of human rights is a core value in modern democracies, it is the case that where we find democracies torturing today we will also be more likely to find stealthy torture" (p. 8). Rejali thus implies that while all regimes engage in torture, democracies were the first to pioneer the use of stealth techniques to avoid detection.

While the book's title suggests it will examine torture within democracies, it would be better described as a history of the use of stealth torture in all but the most authoritarian of regimes. Indeed, Rejali examines the widespread use of clean torture in both democracies and autocracies, and points to domestic and international monitoring to account for the presence of stealth torture in both regime types. Whereas domestic monitoring prompts democracies to utilize clean torture to avoid detection, Rejali contends that international regimes, which are "a set of implicit or explicit norms, principles, and decision-making processes that coalitions of states create to monitor certain issues in international politics," have similarly prompted authoritarian regimes to adopt "clean" torture tactics since the human rights consensus of the 1970s (p. 439). Only in extreme cases, such as Saddam Hussein's Iraq, has blatant physical torture been evident. A key pitfall in Rejali's analysis is his loose

definition of democracy as a “form of government based on amateurism...and participation,” which is broad to the point of losing all meaning (p. 45). The vast political science research on democracy has revealed that any number of states possessing authoritarian qualities could qualify as a democracy according to this rubric. For example in, *Why Dominant Parties Lose*, Kenneth Greene explores the “dominant party equilibrium” in which opposition parties compete but lose in open elections for extended periods of time (2007, p. 1). Greene demonstrates that the resource advantages of the incumbent party enable it to defeat the opposition, yet according to Rejali’s definition of democracy, systems with such “dominant parties” would qualify as democracies because they regularly hold elections (ibid., p. 6).

Rejali develops three models to explain the preconditions for the adoption of torture in democratic states. The “National Security Model” suggests that officers will employ torture during emergencies as a proactive strategy against enemies. “The Juridical Model” uses Japan as a case study to demonstrate “the slippery slope down which police travel once police seek confessions by any means” (p. 60). Finally, the “Civil Discipline Model” examines torture in ancient Athens to argue that it may emerge in cases in which the state cannot provide public security to its citizens. These models serve to explain how and why torturers in democracies act the way they do, advancing Rejali’s claim that torture is not an effective way to gather *accurate* intelligence. Rejali thus contends that torture “cannot be administered professionally, scientifically, or precisely; and it causes serious damage to the institutions that employ it” (p. 576).

The core of the book’s analysis explores the adoption of various torture techniques across the globe. Although a political scientist by training, Rejali examines the popularity of various tortures techniques, including shock, bathtubs, electrocution, sleep deprivation, noise, and drugs, through an historical analysis. Rejali seeks to explain the failure of efficient techniques—defined as those that elicit a confession, whether false or true, in the shortest period of time—to gain use in particular regions (p. 18). He argues that “in case after case, we find availability, habit, and memory shape how torturers choose their techniques. Torturers often choose instruments that are available in the station house or in nearby enterprises (cattle prods from stockyards)” (p. 19). For an historian, this does not seem to be a particularly revealing insight. It should come as no surprise that those carrying out orders use the tools available to them and the techniques with which they are familiar and comfortable.

Despite the breadth of material and research, *Torture and Democracy* has a key weakness. Rejali’s failure to draw upon the political science literature on regime types represents a conspicuous absence from the analysis. A more nuanced distinction between “democratic” and “authoritarian” regimes would have offered more weight to his argument. Doing so would have enabled him to better parse out the reasons that

stealth torture has been adopted universally by the majority of regimes using torture. Even so, Rejali's work is a careful and extensively documented study that will shed light on torture methods for researchers on the topic.

### **Bibliography**

Greene, K., 2007. *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Realism and Political Theory

A review of *Philosophy and Real Politics* by Raymond Geuss. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 126, ISBN13:978-0-691-13788-9, £13.95.

By Michael Bacon

Raymond Geuss' purpose in this short and sometimes polemical book is to inject a dose of realism into contemporary political theory. Much recent discussion in political theory adopts what Geuss calls an 'ethics-first' approach in which an 'ideal theory' of how humans ought to act is identified, politics being seen derivatively as a matter of applied ethics. The ethics-first approach is said to be that of most utilitarians and deliberative democrats, but most significantly of 'neo-Kantian' philosophers such as John Rawls and Robert Nozick. The problem with this approach lies in what Geuss thinks the manifestly false assumptions that ethics is separable from other areas of human life and that it is capable of being captured in a single theory.

In the first part of the book, Geuss proposes a realist approach to political life. It is realist in accepting that politics is not about principles but about concrete power-relations. He finds this approach neatly captured in Lenin's question "Who? Whom?": who has power, for what ends do they use it, and who suffers in consequence? (p. 23). Expanding on this formulation, Geuss proposes that political philosophy should concern itself with five tasks: (1) understanding, specifically of how political agents behave and how decisions are taken ; (2) evaluation, enabling citizens to critically evaluate political institutions and policies in terms such as their usefulness and efficiency; (3) orientation, helping citizens understand their role within their society; (4) conceptual innovation, introducing new terms in order not simply to reflect but to alter the way in which the world is understood; and (5)