

# Introduction:

## On the (il)legitimacy and (in)visibilities of torture

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The four articles on the topic of torture included in this issue are based on contributions to the workshop “Torture and Society: Violated Bodies and Politics of (In-)Visibility”, which took place in Potsdam, Germany, from June 22 to 25 2022. The event brought together scholars from various disciplines and continents and was co-funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), as an activity in the realm of the DFG-funded research project “Torture and Body Knowledge” (project number 646132; see Inhetveen et al. 2020), and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (type of support: Conferences). As convenors of the workshop, we are most grateful to both the DFG and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for their generous support.

The workshop’s aim was to look at how torture, as a bodily but also political practice, interacts with society. It focused on two modes of interaction, or intermediation, between the physical and the social body: on the visibility or invisibility of tortured bodies, and on the violent boundary drawing by torture as a practice. Torture violence is a tool to not only reproduce but also to create boundaries, inscribing them in both the physical and the social body.

The tortured body surfaces in the social and it is, in turn, shaped by a social order that legitimizes the body’s violation, that represents its truths, that forms its practices. With this in mind, we discussed how the body of the tortured is silenced, how that silence shapes the social and the political, how the harm of torture is rendered (selectively) invisible, how it is embedded in and shaped by legal systems, and more generally normative orders, and how it is bound and utilized within politics of representation. We talked about the relationship between torture and the normativity and history of human rights, and about memorialization of torture in recent political conflicts, in an effort to understand (sometimes blurred) links between societies, states, states of exceptions, norms, visibility, and violence.

The workshop’s central questions thus not only asked about making torture visible or invisible and about drawing of group boundaries through torture itself and through its representation. A central point of discussion pertained questions about legitimacy and violence – including that of how we as scholars draw a boundary between scholarship and activism, how to define our own positionality when observing torture as a practice, what it implies when we observe the process of drawing boundaries between these spheres and within torture practice itself, reflecting upon the fact that we are also part of creating boundaries within discourses on torture. Among the workshop participants, different positions in relation to the interface between scholarship and activism were represented, as well as a perspective of art, namely José Giribás, who presented his exhibition “Torture is not talked about”. Beside scholarly presentations and the photo exhibition, a round table discussion on “Torture, Academia, and Political Activity: Challenges and Chances of Combining Perspectives of Involvement” provided an open format to discuss the multi-perspectivity of researching torture, as a form of extreme violence. The participants

engaged in a debate about positioning oneself and being positioned in the area spanning from academic research to activism, from (dis)interested analysis to politically relevant contributions and to making a normative stand. Starting from Jefferson's notion of "thinking through and against torture" (Jefferson *in this issue*: 5, 14), it was discussed how participants worked within a tension between expectations from academia and interventionism; if it was possible at all to decide personally between activism and research or if the question wasn't rather to reflect on how our normative standpoints shape our research (for example whom we aim to understand); who was the 'we' in this discussion as invitations to conferences follow certain patterns and, at the same time, audiences change, and some academic audiences reject a consideration of normative standpoints from the outset. Facing such challenging and maybe unsolvable problems, fruitful starting points were anyway seen in 'putting our position (and knowledge) as scholars to work,' as stated in the discussion, by engaging in partnerships between academia and activist organizations, and to look for generative questions in research about the dynamics of perpetration.

Based on these discussions, the participants agreed upon publishing workshop contributions in a not only peer-reviewed, but also open access journal, to make them accessible for people outside academic institutions, and with fewer resources to spend on buying books or journals – not least practitioners and activists against torture working in often underfunded organizations, such as non-state archives, survivors' organizations, and other initiatives – many of them having supported our research projects with information, materials, and most importantly conversations.

The contributions included in this issue all pursue their respective, specific research questions, the summary of which we leave to abstracts instead of repeating them here. We would like to indicate, however, how they all trace interconnections between the mentioned focuses of the workshop, this is, implications and strategies of the (in)visibility of torture, boundary drawing by (and for) torture, contestations of the (il)legitimacy of torture, and the subsequent questions of researchers' self-positioning. The latter point is a central theme in **Andrew Jefferson's** contribution "Deciphering and Detoxifying Torturing Societies and Torturable Populations - Towards an Inhibitive Manifesto", where it is combined with an analysis shedding light on the boundary drawing that results in constructing "torturable populations", for which a general illegitimacy of torture loses impact and political necessities of invisibilizing torture are weakened. The argument combines scholarly analysis and taking a clear stand in employing academic knowledge for practical causes of demolishing the societal conditions of torture. **Daniel Bultmann's** article "The Politics of Representation: Authenticity and Emotion in Tuol Sleng Visitor Books" looks at different audiences' reactions to visibilizations of torture, in the realm of politics of representations. It shows how constructions of authenticity and emotion in the reactions to visibilized torture are central elements in categorizing and (il)legitimizing political positions. In comparing entries in the museum's visitor books, the author illuminates patterns of political boundary drawing, along the topic of torture, in the historical context of the Cold War. In her contribution "Torture and Populist Masculinity: Political Prospects of Ostentatious Illegitimate Violence", **Katharina Inhetveen** explores how populist politicians might count on potential payoffs from their visible association with torture. In the context of populist boundary drawing towards both 'elites' and othered 'enemies', visibly endorsing torture as widely illegitimized violence can play into the hand of politicians thriving on a self-representation of populist masculinity. **Annette Förster's** contribution "When Democracies Torture – The Nexus between Torture and Terror in the Algerian War" looks at social and political conditions for two types violence illegitimized in democratic societies, this is, 'torture' and 'terror', and at the dynamics of their interrelations. Analyzing the case of the Algerian war, she depicts strategies of visibilizing and discursive battles of (de)legitimizing violence (of both types) in the context of different definitory and legal frame-

works. Boundary drawing here not only applies to the boundaries between the opponents in the Algerian, but also to a boundary between the (democratic) French use of torture against that of Nazi Germany – an important distinction for the French government’s construction of torture as, in the case of Algeria, legitimate violence. Bearing in mind the consequences of the analysis for (possible) contemporary cases of torture, Förster points out that certain conditions for a more likely employment of torture by democratic societies are not a foreign substance originating in an undemocratic outside, but are to be found – and, getting back to Jefferson’s “inhibitive manifesto”, counteracted – within democratic societies.

## References

- Inhetveen, Katharina, Max Breger, Daniel Bultmann, and Christina Schütz. 2020. Folter und Körperwissen – Notizen aus der laufenden Forschung. Siegener Working Papers zur Politischen Soziologie (SWoPS) Nr. 1 (Juli 2020). Siegen: Universität Siegen, Seminar für Sozialwissenschaften. Available online at <https://doi.org/10.25819/ubsi/4435>, checked on 05/15/2023.
- Jefferson, Andrew M. *in this issue*. “Deciphering and Detoxifying Torturing Societies and Torturable Populations: Towards an Inhibitive Manifesto.” In *Transcience* 15, Issue 1: 5-21.

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