

Book Reviews

Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad. By Marnia Lazreg. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. Pp. 335. \$29.95 (paper). ISBN: 069113135X.

In this study, Marnia Lazreg gives us a new and original account of torture during the Algerian war of 1954–62. A second notable feature of this book is its theoretically rich discussion of torture at a more general level, which furnishes important insights into political power at both the macro and the micro levels. Finally, Lazreg's book helps us to theorize the US Government's resort to torture under the Bush administration.

Although the torture policies of the French military during the Algerian war are well known, and were debated at the time by Jean-Paul Sartre and others, Lazreg's first achievement is to present all of this in a new light. She has drawn upon a wealth of new source material, from both the French and the Algerian sides, much of it available only in the last decade. Her new sources include French military archives, as well as first-hand accounts published in recent years, most notably the memoirs of an unrepentant torturer, retired French General Paul Aussaresses, and a book by one of the most prominent victims, former National Liberation Front (FLN) militant Louisette Ighilahriz, both of them published in 2001 amid great controversy in both France and Algeria.

Lazreg effectively mines the military archives for material on the strategic thinking of the French military leadership, which saw Algeria as a new kind of war – *guerre révolutionnaire* – that needed new strategies and tactics, among them the rapid gathering of information to thwart terrorist attacks and protect French civilians. The military also saw the Algerian insurgency as part of a larger turn to guerrilla warfare on the part of communist and nationalist movements, as seen in China and Vietnam, where the counter-insurgency would have to concentrate on the guerrillas' base among the civilian population. Lazreg sees both of the above aspects of this theorization of a new kind of war as having allowed or even encouraged torture.

Moreover, the French military went further, actually institutionalizing torture, including mobile torture chambers that could be deployed alongside troops operating in villages. Here, torture was seen not merely as a tactic to obtain information, however, but also as a means to change Algerians from pro-FLN to pro-French, as part of a colonialist brainwashing designed to create new identities. From the French side, torture helped to sustain a new set of identities within the French military as well, which widely saw

torture as an appropriate response to a movement that threatened French concepts of culture and civilization. In all of these senses, writes Lazreg, the Algerian war was not only the last gasp of a 'dying colonialism' as in Frantz Fanon's celebrated book of that title, but also the harbinger of something new, a modern military doctrine that would find similar applications in the Latin American dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s, from Brazil to Argentina.

Lazreg's second major achievement in this book is to confront and develop a number of theoretical issues concerning the nature of power, power and the body, and power and the deployment of sexuality. Here she develops insights from a wide range of thinkers, among them Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, but always critically. In one telling instance of the latter, she writes that Foucault's suggestion that torture has been replaced by less physical forms of discipline and punishment can be seen as 'shortsighted' if one includes the global South as part of modernity (p. 274).

In discussing torture and sexuality, Lazreg draws heavily on first-hand accounts by Algerian victims, many of whom waited decades to furnish details of their mistreatment. She also notes that thousands of poor and uneducated rural women, who form what is probably the largest category of victims of torture and sexual assault, may go to the grave with their stories. It is to her credit that Lazreg gives as much attention to the sexual abuse and rape of men as to that of women. She draws additionally on accounts by the torturers, whether from the archives or recently published memoirs. And it is also here that torture as a form of homoerotic expression on the part of the torturers is taken up at some length. Not only do the torturers seek to break the spirit of their male victims, but they also refer to the torture session in erotic terms, and to the confession in orgasmic terms. In raising this issue as well as that of the mass rape and torture of rural women, Lazreg helps to break over four decades of silence, thereby giving the study of torture some important new dimensions. Moreover, the microanalysis of specific torturers and specific victims constructs a theory of power from the bottom up.

On a third level, Lazreg's book gives important insights into the use of torture and the ideology surrounding it on the part of the USA after 2001. Lazreg's concentration on France during the Algerian war as her prime example of the political sociology of torture is particularly apt today. That is because, similarly to the USA, the French tended to view their domination of other societies in idealistic terms, with the *guerre révolutionnaire* as a modernized version of the older *mission civilisatrice*. Whereas a more realist doctrine would have spoken more in terms of means and ends, French torture doctrine stressed the productive aspects of torture, not only for the colonial state, but also for the Algerian people as well, who could thereby be 'cured' of what the French military saw as the FLN's backward-looking ideology. As the French military saw it, the Algerians would be able to return to the progressive road of assimilation into the higher and more modern French culture. From the sexual abuse and humiliation at Abu Ghraib to the recent US effort to reform, modernize, and democratize the Muslim world, one can find many disturbing echoes of the French experience in Algeria.

Since I am primarily a social theorist, although I have concentrated in recent years on the theorization of the Middle Eastern/Muslim world, I would also like to comment on

a few of the book's insights with respect to theory, even if they are not always part of its central themes. I already mentioned one of these above, Lazreg's very brief but insightful critique of Foucault, a thinker who has obviously informed this study as well. Lazreg also develops critiques of two of the foremost critical commentators on the Algerian war, Fanon and Sartre, at somewhat greater length. While she adopts aspects of Fanon's well-known theory of violence in *Wretched of the Earth*, she also questions it at a number of levels. For example, she makes an important distinction between 'the temporary release that may be achieved through violence, and its long term transformative impact' (p. 219). Lazreg is far less sanguine than Fanon about the latter. As to Sartre, she applauds his notion that torture and other human rights violations cannot be understood outside the consideration of the overall colonial system. (And as Immanuel Wallerstein has recently reminded us, the 1948 UN Human Rights Declaration failed to list colonial domination as a human rights violation.) But at the same time, she considers Sartre's focus to be overly broad, and to an extent ahistorical, because it was specifically the modern French 'militarized colonial state' of the 1950s that carried out this particular use of torture on a very wide scale as 'a concrete reality' (p. 217). As a Hegelian Marxist, I would also like to mention Lazreg's judicious use of Hegel's discussion of ends as inseparable from means in her critique of the neo-conservative intellectuals of today on torture.

I will close by mentioning that this book is scrupulously even-handed in its treatment of the French and the Algerian positions and practices during the war and after. At no time does Lazreg whitewash the behavior of the FLN, either during the war, or still less, after it came to power. And while she is scathingly critical of Western intellectuals like the *Le Monde* correspondent Françoise Beaugé, who was dubious of Ighilahriz's story of her torture until it was confirmed by a French veteran, she also gives their due to French (and US) intellectuals who have probed more deeply.

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