

Colonial Terror: Torture, Violence and the Unmaking of the World

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NOTE: The Mid-Career Fellowship application form may have been updated since this proposal was submitted.

Abstract

How has torture been deployed as a technology for the management of racialized others? How do we understand the operation of torture in a colonial context such as India in which the torturers were themselves colonized and hence subjugated others? This project will bring two disparate literatures together, namely scholarship on violence in colonial India with sociological research on violence, to consider the connections between forms of violence that are overt and perpetrated by identifiable agents - such as torture - and structural forms of violence in which the effects are not always visible and there are no clear perpetrators. It focuses, firstly, on the torturers themselves, who while agents of violence were also victims of it, since they generally came from the lowest social and economic strata of Indian society - from the strata most affected, in other words, by the structural violence of colonialism.

But this project also concentrates on the ways in which torture was systematized as a technology of colonial rule. As in the case of the neo-imperial states responsible for erecting torture regimes as part of the 'war on terror', the colonial Indian state, rather than acknowledging its own constitutive violence and the utility of torture in making it what Achille Mbembe terms a 'terror formation' (Mbembe 2003), displaced blame either onto rogue individuals or, more commonly, its victims, whose alleged lack of civility justified the civilizing mission of colonialism. The key innovation of this project is therefore to reassess torture in a colonial context such as India not as an aberrant aspect of a liberal system of rule, but as symptomatic of the broader structural 'civilizing' violence of colonialism. It is its elucidation of some of the genealogies of neo-liberal torture regimes and how they operate that make this project of particular contemporary relevance.

The Research Idea *The innovative thesis of the project*

While there is a small body of scholarship on colonial torture, it focuses primarily on torture as a counter-insurgency tool. Such literature also concentrates on torture

enacted by Europeans on non-white bodies rather than, as in the case of colonial India, torture enacted by colonized agents of the colonial state on other colonized bodies.

This project will bring the scholarship on violence in colonial India, which focuses primarily on subjective violence, or violence performed by an identifiable agent, into dialogue with sociological approaches to violence, which illuminate how subjective violence works in conjunction with structural forms of violence that operate through economic, political and legal systems. What's innovative about this research is its elucidation of the nature of the dynamic between subjective and objective violence in the operation of torture in a context such as colonial India. For Indian torturers generally came from the most marginal and impoverished segments of society, namely those segments most subject to the systemic violence of colonialism. The marginality of the torturers was, in turn, central to the ways in

which torture became systematized as a technology of rule, since it enabled the colonial regime to displace the blame for its own constitutive violence on the 'barbarism' and 'incivility' of the colonized themselves. In colonial India torture was therefore merely a symptom of a broader system of structural violence wrought through the 'civilizing' imperative of colonialism, and it is such structural violence that made the systematization of torture as a technology of rule possible.

Background *Current research reference points and their limitations*

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The Focus *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

In Britain, as in the case of contemporary neo-imperial powers, imperial or colonial violence was only acknowledged when it erupted into scandal. Yet the British state was aware of the constitutive violence that made its governance of other peoples possible. The use of torture by the colonial Indian state's subordinates was actually a cause of considerable anxiety in Britain. The primary concern, however, was not the welfare of Indians, but the possible danger that the use of torture as a technology of colonial rule posed to British sovereignty.

Two contemporary concerns make this project both timely and compelling. The first is the centrality of torture in the assertion of neo-liberal sovereignties in the 'war on terror', as witnessed in the torture regimes at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and Camp Breadbasket, as well as the ways in which blame for such systematized violence has been displaced onto rogue individuals rather than on the democratic nation-states responsible for such regimes. The second is the ways in which the victims of such regimes have been blamed for their own victimhood due to their purported lack of civility. This project will trace both some of the genealogies of such modes of power and the discursive constructs that have sustained them, which will offer insights for organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in their campaigns to combat neo-liberal torture regimes. Exposing the historical antecedents of such torture regimes can also be used to inform government policy on foreign affairs and human rights.

Theoretical Novelty *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

The historiography on violence generally treats violence either as heroic grand narrative or as aberrant and deviant. The history of violence is, moreover, primarily about context

- about everything that happens around violence. Violence itself is largely taken as 'known' and hence in little need of investigation. The history of endemic or everyday forms of violence has, therefore, received little scholarly attention.

In the Indian case scholars have begun to study some aspects of the history of everyday violence (Kolsky 2009; Sherman 2009), and to explore the ways in which the colonizers resorted to violence in an attempt to assert their masculinity and shore up their fragile system of governance. What's missing is a broader scholarship on the structural violence of colonialism, as well as on interpersonal violence among the colonized and the connections between these forms of violence.

This project addresses such lacunae by reconceptualising violence in colonial India as a symbiosis of subjective and objective forms of violence that served to rupture the world of the colonized and unmake it. It reassess torture, furthermore, not as an exceptional aspect of colonial rule, but as symptomatic of the broader structural violence of colonialism. Through combining such an approach with a reconsideration of interpersonal violence among the colonized, in particular of the ways in which such violence operated as a cleansing force to restore both masculinity and self-respect - and, with it to remake the world - it ultimately aims to rethink the connections between colonialism, race, modernity and terror.

Methodology *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry*

Since I am a historian my primary methodology will be archival research. I carried out preliminary research on torture in the Indian National Archives (INA) in 2011. For this project I will conduct research in the INA, select regional Indian archives (in Chennai, Kolkata, Lucknow and Chandigarh) and in the India Office collections at the British Library. My research will concentrate on the following:

- ' the use of torture by the Indian police to extract confessions and intimidate peasants;
- ' the use of torture in the collection of revenue (a common practice in light of high colonial revenue assessments);

- ' official policies and procedures in relation to torture, in particular the many enactments, inquiries, commissions, reports, and administrative responses from the early nineteenth century onwards;
- ' legal enactments on torture and judgments in torture cases;
- ' medical jurisprudence literature on the embodied impact of torture on Indian bodies;
- ' reports on torture in colonial India in the Indian and British press.

In light of the insights offered by postcolonial scholarship on the impossibility of recovering subaltern voices from colonial archives, my aim in conducting such research is neither to recover the subjectivity of the colonized nor to extract the 'truth' of colonial violence. My goal is instead to draw upon the interdisciplinary approaches outlined above to read colonial archives along the archival grain by interrogating the myriad traces of violence in them and to consider how and why evidence of the torture of Indian bodies is contained in such archives.

Work Plan *How the work will be organised over the award period and what outputs are intended.*

During the award period for this project I will devote the first five months to carrying out research, and the final seven months writing up my findings. Such findings will be disseminated through publications, a series of workshops, and a website.

The principal outcome of this project will be book on torture as a technology of rule in colonial India. I have begun preparing to write such a book, and to generate interest in it, by exploring the theoretical framework of the project through a series of articles. I also intend to write two additional, related articles on colonial violence and trauma, and on rape and torture. I anticipate completing such publications in 2018.

The findings of this project will also be disseminated through three workshops that are part of an international research network I have established on colonialism, violence and culture. This network brings together academics from a range of disciplines with museum curators, government officials and human rights activists. The initial workshop, on the silencing of colonial violence, will be held in London in July 2017. Further workshops on interrogating what constitutes colonial violence, and how to represent it, will be held in Delhi in January 2018 and Newcastle, Australia, in July 2018. The aim of

the workshops will be to develop new approaches to understanding colonial violence and tackling its legacies.

This project will also inform the development of a collaborative website, to be launched in July 2018, to disseminate the findings of the workshops.

Outcome *What further steps and what longer-term outcome are envisaged.*

I envision four longer-term outcomes for this project:

I will build on my current research through carrying out a related project on imperialism, torture and postcoloniality. Such a project will enable me to ascertain the similarities and distinctions between colonial and neo-liberal imperial states in their modes of governance of racial others.

I will also build upon both the findings of this project and of the international research network that I have developed through submitting a Horizon 2020 collaborative grant bid for a project that interrogates the nature of colonial violence across diverse locations and time periods, as well as the legacies of such violence. As the lead investigator for this bid I anticipate submitting a proposal to one of the relevant research themes, such as 'Engaging Together Globally', in 2018.

Since there are no Master's programmes in the UK that specifically focus on the history of violence I will, furthermore draw upon the findings of this project to develop a new MA strand on the history of violence at the University of Liverpool. Once this is established I will apply for a collaborative Marie Skłodowska-Curie Co- fund grant to foster doctoral training on the history of violence.

Finally, building on my research and my research network, I will develop stronger links with human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to develop campaigns to combat torture by neo-imperial states. I aim to use such linkages to help shape government policy on foreign affairs and human rights.