

Migration and torture in today's world

fabio Perocco (ed.)

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Giulia Berta¹

The goal of the volume *Migration and Torture in Today's World*, curated by Fabio Perocco, is to show the existence of a link between torture and current migration policies. In the different essays that make up the book, the term “torture” is understood in a broad sense and used with a broader meaning than the mere legal definition. In this context, the legal distinction between the concepts of torture, inhuman and degrading practice and deliberate violence is put aside in favour of a more multifaceted look that includes all the forms of violence – physical, psychological, and moral – perpetuated against migrants. In this regard, it should be noted that the passive acceptance of any form of violence and/or cruelty prevents the real abolition of torture (Scott, 1999). What the different authors highlight as particularly relevant is thus the deliberateness of the realised violence: “The constructed and intentional character of what the judges of the ECHR most often designate as “ill-treatment” through, on the one hand, an institutional organisation and the legitimisation of the violent practices of the agents, and, on the other hand, their indel-

ible consequences on the mental and physical health of migrants (and their children) as powerful as those resulting from torture, would they not suggest re-labelling and recognising these inhuman practices as typical forms of torture (punishment, pressure, intimidation) [...]?” (p. 220-221)².

The 11 articles that make up the book, put into frame thanks to the curator's broad introductory essay, show how violence constitutes a structural element of the migration experience. In fact, a general atmosphere of insecurity and fear – if not of widespread violence – characterises the migration journey in each of its stages, from the decision to emigrate itself to the conditions born by the migrants, both in transit and destination countries (Sane, J. & Holmblad, M., 2021). “Migration is often triggered by violence *from* which people move *into* violence when crossing borders. Although these violent events take place across distant geopolitical contexts – ‘non-European autocracies’ and ‘European democracies’ – I noticed that violence at the EU border was often intertwined with abuses in one's home [...]” (p. 140). In this context, the reader is invited to reflect on the universality of torture, which, far from being a phenomenon of the past exclusively linked to the horrors of history and unconceivable in modern democracies, is still current, widespread, and organised practice. The geographical breadth covered by the various episodes of the volume shows how no political form is immune from that violent exercise of power that constitutes the core of torture. Bringing to the reader's attention some of the main violent practices that characterise today's global migration policies, such as

1) Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage.
Correspondence to: giulia.berta@aiesec.net

2 All numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in the book.

pushbacks, detention centres confinements, forced deportations etc., the essay aims to deconstruct the idea, shared by Western countries, of being immune from the danger of torture. In this regard, it is highlighted how the denial of the possibility of torture constitutes a double threat: on one hand, the non-recognition of torture itself; on the other hand, its legitimisation and normalisation (Di Cesare, 2016).

The volume's importance therefore lies in the provision of a free tool³ of dissemination and comprehension of the perils – above all, the one relative to the violation of the prohibition of torture and other inhumane and degrading practices – that are intrinsic in the repressive approach that characterises current migration policies. The educational goal of the book is also clear from its interdisciplinarity: the different articles are written by professionals like sociologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, anthropologists, jurists, philosophers, activists and doctors whose backgrounds are varied and complement one another. This gives the text a wide-ranging and shared value that is capable of going beyond the pure academism to become social action and transformation. When writing their pieces, the authors relied on different instruments of research and analysis; this approach provided the book with a particular richness of eclecticism and dynamism. Even the language chosen, clear and to the point, seems in line with the goal of dissemination and comprehension for the reader.

The book begins by providing a theoretical analysis of the key concepts of torture and racism and the systematic relation between

the two to demonstrate how and why that relation became central and structural in today's migration policies. In this regard, the book analyses both the phenomena of racism and torture starting from their social production: as a matter of fact, both are structural elements of the social system and expression of the unequal power relationships that the system contains. It is shown how torture and racism represent, at the same time, the reflection and the mechanism of production of a certain kind of social relationship: that of oppression and exploitation. As a consequence, racism and torture are in each structurally unequal society, that is, a society based on discrimination, hierarchy and exploitation, regardless of the specific form of political government. If we define racism as the mix of violent theories and practices that the dominant classes produced to legitimate unequal relationships of power, competition and hierarchy between classes and nations through the submission and dehumanisation of the oppressed, we can reach the conclusion that the full realisation of the racist ideology can only be achieved with torture, that is violence built in the system. It is, therefore, an inseparable *continuum* through which torture takes shapes in (and from) racial discriminations and racism in (and from) the structural violence that is inherent in the social system. They feed each other and together they feed and maintain the material relationships of exploitation and submission of which they are expression (Pettenò, 2010).

By unveiling the social origin of the link between torture and racism, the book allows the reader to understand a third linking element represented by the productive dynamics on which modern economic systems are founded. In fact, for the capitalist system to maintain itself, it is necessary to start a progressive process of labour devaluation:

3 The book is published as *open access* by University of Venice Ca' Foscari Editions. Free download from: <https://edizionicafoscarini.unive.it/it/edizioni/libri/978-88-6969-636-7/>.

lowering the costs of production through a global compression of the labour force that is conducive to the hyper-exploitation of the workers, their work instability and devaluation, is the key through which many countries try to remain competitive in the market. As a result, torture and racism, conceived as the effective instruments through which fulfil the submission and exploitation of the oppressed, become an integral part of the economic market dynamics. In this context, we can understand how the real goal of evermore restrictive and discriminatory migration policies is not the complete elimination of migration flows, but rather the reduction of immigrants to a mass of interchangeable, precarious, and exploitable workers. "This system of immigration treatment offers the labour market a mass of frightened workers, extremely prone to be blackmailed, who, after having experienced incredible hardship, are willing to accept the most miserable conditions" (p. 37).

After analysing the specific factors that have determined the establishment of the preconditions favourable to the spread, on a global scale, of a general climate of violence against immigrants, the book offers a broad overview of the phenomenon. Specifically, the cases of USA-Mexico, Spain, the Balkans, Greece, mid Mediterranean, Italy, Libya, Belgium, Israel, and Myanmar. The goal is to shed light on how the mistreatment of migrants is a global phenomenon, intrinsically linked to the countries' policies and, as such, systematic and organised. The physical and psychological damages suffered by migrants do not constitute the unexpected and unwanted consequences of what is defined as a migration crisis or emergency, but it is rather the structurally violent form that the current "anti-migrant war" has taken globally.

Finally, the last contribution of the book is on the medical-psychological dimension of the migrants as victims of torture and other inhumane and degrading practices, suffering from invisible wounds that are equally as painful and hard to cure. In this context, violence is often accompanied by the discomfort of telling and sharing the story and of external recognition. The *non-visibility* of the damage risks to further aggravate the conditions of the victim, for instance by making obstructing access to the international protection the victim would be entitled to. In the analysis, it is therefore crucial to include not only the physical, but also the psychological and moral violence. The latter, just like the first one, can leave permanent scars on the mental health of the victim. That is why the conditions of access to care and hospitality offered by the destination country are crucial. However, they often are inadequate and end up worsening the migrants' health further (Barbieri *et al.*, 2019).

To sum up, I believe that the greatest merit of the book is that of providing the readers with an all-encompassing instrument of knowledge and awareness that reunites, in one single book, contributions from different contexts and methodologies that share the common goal of unveiling (and thus, fight) the systematically violent nature of current migration policies.

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