

# The Secret Society of Torturers: The Social Shaping of Extremely Violent Behaviour

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# The Secret Society of Torturers: The Social Shaping of Extremely Violent Behaviour

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How do normal people become able to torture others? In order to explain this puzzling social phenomenon, we have to take secrecy – the characteristic trait of modern torture – as the lynchpin of the analysis. Following Georg Simmel’s formal analysis of the “secret society”, the contribution reconstructs structural and cultural aspects of the secret society of torturers that generate social processes that allow its members to behave extremely violently, forcing individuals to turn into torturers. The contribution argues that the form of social behaviour that we call torture is socially shaped. It goes beyond social psychology to develop an explanation from the perspective of relational sociology.

When it comes to torture, nothing is as horrifying as realising what people are capable of doing unto others. It is virtually impossible to understand how torturers can physically and/or psychologically abuse or even kill while at the same time being caring fathers and loving husbands (Browning 1992; Conroy 2000). However, as with war criminals or terrorists, neither generally declaring the perpetrators insane psychopaths or sadists nor searching for their individual motives or interests enables us to fully explain this deeply puzzling social phenomenon. Rather, we will only be able to understand torture if we perceive it as a consequence of the social shaping of interactions within a specific social form. Interactions create social forms that in turn shape behaviour. This is the case in families, friendships, clubs, and associations, and even in nations. The same applies to the creation of groups of torturers that shape the behaviour of those who do the “dirty work”. In this sense, torture is not anti-social but brought about by the social form that torturers are actively involved in.

In order to develop an approach that may explain the social shaping of torturers’ extremely violent behaviour, the present article restricts the analysis to torture executed “in the name of a state” as an instrument of “state terror” (Sluka 2000).<sup>1</sup> We can conceive torture as a form of collective violence; a purposive act performed by coordinated social actors in order to gather information, to make individuals betray alleged co-conspirators, partisans, etc. Rather than being executed for its own sake as pure “excesses of violence” (Sofsky 1997), we can therefore define torture as “(a) the intentional infliction of extreme physical suffering on some non-consenting, defenceless person; (b) the intentional, substantial curtailment of the exercise of the person’s autonomy (achieved by means of (a)); (c) *in general*, undertaken for the purpose of breaking the victim’s will” (Miller 2008).<sup>2</sup>

In the context of cycles of political attention, torture has been a widely discussed topic in sociology for some time now. Examining torture regimes in South America and

<sup>1</sup> Here, I do not discuss the violent behaviour of individuals acting alone that is sometimes portrayed in movies. See, *inter alia*, John Schlesinger’s *Marathon Man* 1976, Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* 1992, or Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Evidently, extreme psychological abuse also belongs in this brief definition.

southern Europe, Jan Philipp Reemtsma (1991a) outlined a research programme on torture as a social phenomenon, while detailed case studies exist for countries such as Argentina (Feitlowitz 1998; Lewis 2002), Chile (Ensalaco 2000), Brazil (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002), Greece (Haritos-Fatouros 2003), and Cambodia (Chandler 1999). In recent years, systematic torture in the so-called “war on terror” has triggered debates not only in the United States (Cohen 2005; Hersh 2004; Jaffer and Singh 2007; Koch 2008; Mayer 2008; McCoy 2006). In comparative studies, Cohen and Corrado (2005), Greenberg and Dratel (2005), Einolf (2007), and MacMaster (2004) have analysed torture as a means of domination in Western democracies; further, Linklater (2007) has contextualised torture within the general process of civilisation, while Reemtsma (2012) discusses in detail extreme violence as perpetrated by torturers as a basic constituent of modernity itself. The consequences of torture for the victims is the main focus in Asad (1996), Conroy (2000), Hooks and Mosher (2005), and Sofsky (2005), while recently von Trotha’s (2011) outline of a “sociology of cruelty” and Inhetveen’s (2011) study of a sociology of the body have opened up new perspectives for a sociological debate on torture.

The present article contributes to this important debate from the perspective of a relational sociology. It argues that in order to explain what enables individuals to behave extremely violently and turns them into torturers, we have to do more than provide highly interesting insights from experiments in social psychology – illustrating the trait of unquestioning obedience (Milgram 1974) – or examine the social system/hierarchy within which they act (Zimbardo 2009). Obviously, social psychology stresses factors that have a direct effect on the individual, such as being trained, indoctrinated, or selected, examining both the ability to torture and the situation of torture itself. The present article goes a step further, and argues that we have to take into consideration the wider social relations affecting torturers, the critical factor being that their social

organisation can be defined as a *secret society*. In order to integrate torture as a tool of power with an explanation of the shaping of torture as a form of social behaviour, I depart from the basic assumption that *secrecy* is the most significant aspect of torture as a modern phenomenon that generates opportunity structures for this form of social behaviour.

To develop this argument, the article begins with a closer look at different aspects of secrecy, before briefly outlining Georg Simmel’s classic analysis of “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies” (1906). By applying this formal and relational approach to the *secret society of torturers*, *secrecy* becomes the lynchpin of the present analysis,<sup>3</sup> which discusses both cultural and structural traits of this form of association. Against this background, it finally explains the social shaping of torturers’ behaviour.

#### 1. Four Aspects of Secrecy

With regard to the nexus between torture and secrecy, we have to distinguish at least four aspects. *First*, as Foucault (1979) has generally shown, unlike historical forms of martyrdom that were practised in public, “modern torture” is executed in secrecy (Grüny 2003, Rejali 2007). However, Reemtsma (1991b, 253) has pointed out that this generalised and often-mentioned aspect holds only for the public martyring that was practised to serve as a deterrent and to demonstrate the unlimited power of secular and religious authority.

*Second*, and more recently, non-democratic and democratic states alike attempt to conceal torture as a tool of power. In its latest report, Amnesty International (2014) shows that people are tortured in 141 countries.<sup>4</sup> None of these societies’ governments would openly admit to using or condoning torture. Either citizens are not really aware of what is happening, as in Chile under the Pinochet regime: “Abducted prisoners were taken to one of a number of secret detention centers, where they were held incommunicado and interrogated under torture” (Ensalaco 2000, 90).

3 A number of scholars refer to secrecy, concealment or stealth (Rejali 2007) with respect to torture. Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo

(2002, 49 ff.) refer to Simmel but it is not central to their analysis.

4 <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT40/004/2014/en/96fde57f-61d9-487b-90dc-7da21c6c505d/act400042014en.pdf>.

Or, as occurs all over the globe, non-democratic, authoritarian, or military regimes let their citizens know to some extent what they are doing to their opponents in order to cause anxiety among the entire population. Although torture may be an “open secret” in such cases, we know from countries like Argentina that it may require pressure – as exerted by social movements such as the “Madres de Plaza de Mayo” and others – to finally reveal the facts (in that case the existence of approximately five hundred secret torture prisons) (Feitlowitz 1998). In the modern age, all regimes draw a veil of secrecy over acts of torture.

*Third*, this applies in particular when it comes to torture in democracies. Here secrecy becomes obligatory, since by using torture democratic states knowingly violate their own moral foundations (cf. Rejali 2007, 16 ff., 569). This “dark side” of democracies is manifested in two forms. On the one hand, democracies may torture people themselves, as the United States did in Germany after World War II (McCoy 2006), in Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and the CIA’s secret prisons in Poland, Romania, and Lithuania; France in the wars in Algeria (Vidal-Naquet 1963, Fanon 1963) and Indochina; the United Kingdom in the conflict with the Irish Republican Army (Conroy 2000) and as the ruling power in Kenya (Benenson 1959); or Belgium in the Congo (Van Reybrouck 2014). On the other hand, democracies may accept and support torture by non-democratic regimes (McCoy 2006), even when their own citizens become victims. Germany provides a striking example. In May 1977, a young German citizen, Elisabeth Käsemann, was accused by the Argentine junta of being a terrorist. The innocent woman was abducted, raped, tortured, and finally killed on 24 May. While the military regime claimed her death occurred in a clash between armed guerrillas and the military, in fact the military killed a group of defenceless prisoners including Käsemann. Unlike the United Kingdom, France, or Austria, which intervened forcefully and successfully in cases of their own, the German government

did not intervene to save her life, although the German ambassador and politicians were aware of what was happening. To this day, neither the foreign minister at the time, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, nor the Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, have been willing to speak openly about why they sacrificed a young woman to *realpolitik* by silently and knowingly supporting (and benefitting economically from) a military regime that violated human rights.<sup>5</sup> Thus, as a *tool of power*, democracies and non-democracies alike are interested in keeping torture secret.

*Finally*, and this is the essence of the present article, a genuine explanation of how and why people are able to torture others has to take seriously the social relations within groups of torturers. Without any doubt, recruitment processes, schooling, and ideological indoctrination are of utmost importance (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002, 160–91); however, I argue, explaining the social shaping of torturers’ violent behaviour has to address the way this form of behaviour is triggered under conditions of secrecy, within the social context of a secret society. To introduce this argument, I will first briefly outline Georg Simmel’s (1906) formal and relational account of secrecy as a sociological fact.

## 2. The Formal Analysis of the Secret Society

Georg Simmel’s analysis of the *secret society* enables us to explain and understand both the way groups of torturers are organised and how this affects the behaviour of their members. In order to understand how and why torturers behave extremely violently, we have to perceive the formation of any secret society as a type of association (*Vergesellschaftung*), based on a shared secret that is fraught with consequences: “So soon, however, as a group as such seizes upon secrecy as its form of existence, the sociological meaning of the secrecy becomes internal. It now determines the reciprocal relations of those who possess the secret in common” (Simmel 1906, 470). The idea of reciprocity is critical as it makes the social relations of actors

5 The case of Elisabeth Käsemann was brought back to collective awareness recently by Eric Friedler’s 2014 documentary *Das Mädchen – Was geschah mit Elisabeth K.?*

the basis of the analysis and the starting point for examining the dynamics of the social processes that characterise these relations. Against this background, Simmel differentiates between two forms of secret societies that both point to specific features of this type of association:

Its elements may live in the most frequent commerce, but that they compose a society – a conspiracy, or a band of criminals, a religious conventicle, or an association for sexual extravagances – may remain essentially and permanently a secret. This type, in which not the individuals but their combination is concealed, is sharply distinguished from the others, in which the social formation is unequivocally known, but the membership, or the purpose, or the special conditions of the combination are secrets. (470–471)

But why do secret societies emerge? Why do people turn to secrecy and why is the idea of secret societies of interest for an analysis of modern torture? Interestingly, Simmel not only refers to a “band of criminals”, but also formulates the general proposition that “the secret society emerges everywhere as correlate of despotism and of police control. It acts as protection alike of defence and of offense against the violent pressure of central powers” (472). And, importantly, Simmel further qualifies this, contending that whatever these bands do, we always observe a distinctive “radical break with moral imperatives” (473).

Simmel’s argument is “bottom-up”, describing criminal bands acting against a central power, thereby violating existing law. However, although this may apply to any kind of secret society, it is another matter altogether when it comes to torture as a means of rule of the central power itself. In this case, we need to take a “top-down” look, where the central power (or parts of it) itself turns into a criminal band that practises torture as a tool of power against its own citizenry and other individuals, thereby violating moral imperatives. In the case of a “secret society of torturers” organised within a state’s institutions, both forms that Simmel distinguishes are bound together: when it comes to torture, we neither know (or will know) about the secret society of torturers itself, nor do we know (or will know) who its members are – although in some political regimes torture is a kind of open secret. We might guess only that groups of torturers are at work, but do not know who belongs to them. In other regimes, we see members of

the police, military police, or military, but have no idea about the existence of a group of torturers within their ranks.

### 2.1. Secret Societies as Associations

Any association, be it secret or not, is characterised by a certain *purpose* of association and relies on a number of tenets of faith. In many cases, there is no reason to keep the purpose secret. For example, national communities are based on a sense of national belonging, political parties are built on shared political convictions and programmes, while the European Union claims to be founded on a common project. However, in the case of secret societies, their purpose can have crucial consequences: Given that a criminal band’s purpose is characterised by dissociation from the moral convictions of the wider society and deliberately breaking its shared moral rules, there are two vital aspects to keeping its purpose secret. First, the social relations of the secret society’s members must be based on confidence. Second, *confidence* is indispensable since the purpose of secrecy leads to the *protection* of both the secret society as a whole and its individual members (see Simmel 1906, 470). Obviously, to be so extremely dependent on the confidence of all members of a secret society is a double-edged sword. Over time, members of a secret society might become disappointed or even horrified by the violence of their acts and disclose the secret, thereby betraying the secret society. The indispensable confidence that guarantees secrecy turns out to be the secret society’s Achilles heel:

The keeping of the secret is something so unstable, the temptations to betrayal are so manifold, in many cases such a continuous path leads from secretiveness to indiscretion, that unlimited faith in the former contains an incomparable preponderance of the subjective factor. (473)

It turns out that secret societies are based on a precarious balance. While concealing their existence and purpose of association, they depend on the discretion of their members as the only possible protection; betrayal potentially threatens their existence. Just how dangerous it will be for a secret society to be either betrayed or discovered depends on both the interest of association and the precautions taken in order to stabilize the social relations within it.

The necessary stabilization of such a secret society results from two principles that are implemented into its organisational structure in order to oblige its members to adhere to the purpose of association: *hierarchy* and *rituals* both play a crucial role. Structurally, at least three elements create a clearly defined hierarchy in a secret society: the process of successive recruitment, a division of labour, and a rationalist structure. Culturally, however, for Simmel, a plurality of rites and formulae sets a secret society apart from open society:

That which is striking about the treatment of the ritual in secret societies is not merely the precision with which it is observed, but first of all the anxiety with which it is guarded as a secret – as though the unveiling of it were precisely as fatal as betrayal of the purposes and actions of the society, or even the existence of the society altogether. (480)

These forms of rituals within the secret society generate what Simmel calls “a well-rounded unity” (481) that both structurally and culturally influences its members’ behaviour. This impact is critical as it triggers specific demands upon the individual.

Finally, unlike ordinary life in open society, the “secret society must seek to create among the categories peculiar to itself, a species of life-totality” (481). Both content and form have to be kept secret “because only so can a harmonious whole come into being, in which one part supports the other” (481).

This typical trait of the secret society has consequences for its members, since:

“One of its essential characteristics is that, even when it takes hold of individuals only by means of partial interests, when the society in its substance is a purely utilitarian combination, yet it claims the whole man in a higher degree, it combines the personalities more in their whole compass with each other, and commits them more to reciprocal obligations, than the same common purpose would within an open society.” (481)

This is a form of idealisation of the secret society. By detaching itself from the wider society and closing itself off, the secret society develops its own structures and rituals, and defines itself as much more significant than any other area of the lives of its members. This situation generates a specific structure of social relations that triggers

complex and contradictory codes of conduct for members that cannot be reduced to individual dispositions or beliefs.

## 2.2. Social Closure: The Secret Society as a Counterpart to the Official World

From the perspective of closure theory, a form of association without any processes of social closure is inconceivable (see Weber 1967; Mackert 2012). Hence, the closure of the secret society to outsiders is a necessary and characteristic feature. Rituals such as taking an oath or vow, or making a pledge of loyalty serve to reinforce and confirm its purpose. Therefore, we can define these as the vital mechanisms of social closure that increase the level of concealment and advance processes of closure against the wider society, with crucial consequences:

Moreover, through such formalism, just as through the hierarchical structure above discussed, the secret society constitutes itself a sort of counterpart of the official world with which it places itself in antithesis. Here we have a case of the universally emerging sociological norm; viz., structures, which place themselves in opposition to and detachment from larger structures in which they are actually contained, nevertheless repeat in themselves the forms of the greater structures. (Simmel 1906, 481–82)

Although closure leads to the development within the secret society of structures that correspond to those of the wider society, it is decisive that the closed secret society seeks to be an “antithesis” to the official world enclosing it. In the case of a secret society of torturers, the idea of antithesis refers to the breaking of the basic rules and norms of the wider society under the shelter of secrecy. This link is central: it allows for an emerging freedom of the individual that transcends all moral and lawful regulation of behaviour:

Whether the secret society [...] complements the inadequate judicature of the political area; or whether, as in the case of conspiracies or criminal bands, it is an uprising against the law of that area; or whether, as in the case of the “mysteries,” they hold themselves outside of the commands and prohibitions of the greater area, in either case the apartness (*Heraussonderung*) which characterizes the secret society has the tone of a freedom. In exercise of this freedom a territory is occupied to which the norms of the surrounding society do not apply. The nature of the secret society as such is autonomy. It is, however, of a sort which approaches anarchy. Withdrawal from the bonds of unity which procure general coherence very easily has as consequences for the secret society a condition of being without roots, an absence of firm touch with life (*Lebensgefühl*), and of restraining reservations. (482)

This point cannot be overemphasised, as it is key to understanding the ways in which social relations transform the conditions of individuals' behaviour by providing opportunities for a kind of behaviour that was previously inconceivable. The aspect of freedom is pivotal, as the release from moral and lawful constraints of the wider society resulting from the secret society's closure and detachment in fact generates autonomy for a band of criminals, which can trigger violence and lead to anomic features (Mestrovic and Lorenzo 2008). This process has further consequences: closure against the wider society has follow-up costs for the individuals involved, such as feelings of uprootedness, a lack of stability, and the loss of normative support. But even in this case of tension between freedom and normative constraint, Simmel argues that the secret society's rituals may have a compensatory and stabilising function: "With the ritual the secret society voluntarily imposes upon it a formal constraint, which is demanded as a complement by its material detachment and self-sufficiency" (Simmel 1906, 483).

### 3. The Secret Society of Torturers

Against the background of Simmel's formal analysis of the secret society, the analysis assumes that the "secret element in societies is a primary sociological fact" (Simmel 1906, 483). Secrecy not only has consequences for social relations within the secret society but also provides opportunity structures that channel its members' behaviour into torture. This is not to argue in a structuralist vein but to stress the social shaping of a specific behaviour as a consequence of interaction (*Wechselwirkung*).

#### 3.1. A Dual Purpose

As an association organised within institutions of the state apparatus like the military, the military police, or the regular police, the secret society acts in secrecy in a twofold sense: neither the group itself nor its members are known to the wider society. This acting in secrecy follows from the *purpose* of a secret society of torturers, since as an instrument of state terror, it has a dual purpose: first, to force victims to reveal everything they know about membership, strategies, tactics, and objectives of organisations and groups; second, to break the will of those defined as enemies:

The purpose of torturing is to get their responses. It's not something we do for the fun of it. [...] Another purpose is to break them (psychologically) and to make them lose their will. It's not something that's done out of individual anger, or for self-satisfaction. (*S-21 Interrogator's Manual of the Khmer Rouge*, cited in Crelinsten 1995, 35)

While both purposes violate basic moral principles and standards codified in both national and international law (McEntee 1996), torture itself is extremely destructive in a double sense. First, it affects a person's dignity in a way that disrupts his or her relationship to the world:

Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part of the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was experienced as the antiman remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. (Améry 1980, 40)

Second, as we know from the long-term consequences in countries that suffered excesses of state terror, torture is a social phenomenon that triggers a collective trauma which Erickson defines as a "blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community" (1994, 233).

Consequently, not only the abstract violation of norms, values, or laws by state institutions but also torture's concrete destructive effects on individual victims and the wider society make it necessary to keep the dual purpose secret. The extreme assault on both individuals' lives and the social fabric of a society thus poses an enormous challenge to the members of the secret society of torturers with regard to the degree of mutual confidence its members have to establish and maintain to protect the secret society and themselves.

#### 3.2. Hierarchy, Ritual and Violence

In the face of this double assault and given the fact that violence is constituent for the secret society of torturers, not only will enormous confidence among the secret society's members be necessary to offer protection for members and association alike but, in the face of the sheer brutality involved, violence will also be a crucial means to subjugate the torturers themselves and avoid betrayal. Thus, while following Simmel's idea that the precarious

balance between mutual confidence and the risk of betrayal will be stabilised by *hierarchy* and *rituals*, we necessarily have to add *violence* as a third critical element.

*First*, the significance of both hierarchy and the principle of order and obedience is self-evident, as we know from analyses of military or police organisations (Jannowitz 1971; Bröckling 1996; Apelt 2012). This is not only true within these normally legitimated institutions within which the secret society of torturers operates but also with regard to illegitimate secret societies of torturers that reproduce these structural traits within themselves.

A secret society of torturers will also include people in top positions in the state and wider circles of secrecy (Cohen 2005; Greenberg, and Dratel 2005) such as both national and “helpful” foreign secret services, as seen in Brazil under the military regime. Secrecy within these criminal bands is critical well beyond the inner circle: “[It was] interesting, provocative – everything [...] had to be kept secret. [...] The man in the secret service is very important to the state. We kept in touch with [...] [American] consuls – [particularly] those who were CIA agents” (interview in Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002, 96–7).

*Second*, rituals related to inclusion or specific activities commit members to one another and institutionalise regularities, reinforcing both their ties and their mutual monitoring. Initiation rituals are of utmost importance in order to bend recruits to obey their superiors and to subjugate them under military discipline, as reported by former torturers of the Greek military junta:

It started with an initiation ceremony on the first day of arrival at the ESA [Greek military police] training camp. After an initiation beating inside the cars taking the recruits to the camp and upon entering the camp, recruits were asked to swear allegiance to the totemic-like symbol of authority used by the junta, promising, on their knees, faith to their commander-in-chief and to the revolution. (Haritos-Fatouros 1988, 1114)

*Third*, as initiation rituals are often already violent, violence and threats become typical of the personal situation of those who are part of a secret society of torturers at the lower level doing the dirty work. The recruits:

had to endure torture as if it were an everyday “normal” act. They all described a daily routine of flogging in which they were often forced to run to exhaustion, fully equipped, and were beaten at the same time. [...] Older servicemen flogged and degraded the freshmen, in preparation for the recruits’ task of torturing that was soon to follow. Older servicemen were never forced to do so, but they often used degrading remarks as negative reinforcements for the young soldiers to produce the desired effect. (Haritos-Fatouros 1988, 1116–17)

As well as the experience of violence, threats against servicemen and their families are also used as instruments to stabilise the secret society as a whole. As one reported, “an officer used to tell us that if a warder helps a prisoner, he will take the prisoner’s place and the whole platoon will flog him. We always lived with this threat over our heads” (Haritos-Fatouros 1988, 1117). Further, peer pressure within the hierarchy, rituals of masculinity such as exposing members to ridicule, and threats were used to stabilise the association: “The day you leave, José, we will cut off your head” (Atkinson 1989, cited in Crelinsten 1995, 59). Thus, within the secret society, a hierarchy associated with the principle of order and obedience, rituals, violence, and threats produces a social situation that is virtually impossible to escape:

I was trained in interrogation and counterintelligence work. I was then given the job of hunting people down and interrogating, torturing and killing them. Because [...] of the situation in which I was living and what I had to do, I reacted and tried repeatedly to leave, but this was impossible, because once you are in you cannot get out. (Plate and Darvi 1983, cited in Crelinsten 1995, 59).

### 3.3. The Consequences of Social Closure

As we have seen, social closure plays a crucial role in securing the existence of any kind of association. In the case of the secret society of torturers, we have seen that closing the association not only detaches it from the wider society but also accomplishes a radical break with moral imperatives. Here, closure has effects that allow a deeper understanding of the secret society of torturers: a self-conception of the secret society as an elite; the significance of supporters who are only partly familiar with the interest of the association; a specific ruthlessness in pursuing its goal.

### 3.4. Elitism

Merely the formal fact of closure within an organisation of specialists in violence such as the military or the police will



lead the secret society of torturers to see itself as elite. This self-conception as an elite holds true for the position within the wider organisation:

Primary among them was inculcation of the idea that the ESA was the strongest and most important supporter of the regime, which depended upon the army police for its safety and continuation. Recruits were made to believe that an ESA serviceman's action is never questioned: "You can flog a major", they were told. [...] (Haritos-Fatouros 1988, 1115)

On the other hand, this effect of developing a self-conception as elite corresponds with processes of degradation and dehumanisation that Asad (1996) claims trigger feelings of omnipotence in the torturers that turn them into *social monsters in a monstrous kind of authority*: "We are everything for you. We are justice. We are God" (Hamburg Institute for Social Research 1987, 24, author's translation).

### 3.5. Supporters

Some sections of the military or (secret) police hierarchy, administrative staff of the institutions, and even members of a government will be only partly initiated into the secret of a secret society. This circle "constitutes to a certain extent a buffer area against the totally uninitiated" (Simmel 1906, 489) and will fulfil an important protective function. While this group communicates with the secret society and knows something about the secret, it also remains detached from it in order to conceal the secret and misinform the wider society, as was the case with Abu Ghraib when the US Administration denied all accusations for as long as possible (including secret CIA prisons in other countries) and began an Orwellian debate on "torture lite" (McCoy 2006). However, in the case of torture, there is also another side of the coin, as the seemingly anonymous top of the hierarchy (namely in the White House and in the Pentagon) was protected by discretion. When the secret society of torturers was uncovered by the Abu Ghraib pictures, these rulers were able to deny any kind of involvement in the operations of torture. Rather, they sacrificed members of the lower levels of the secret society's hierarchy by pathologising and dishonouring them (Hersh 2004).

### 3.6. Ruthlessness

Torturers pursue their purpose extremely ruthlessly within a social and cultural structure that offers no exit option but generates strong conviction on the part of those who actually torture, as illustrated by an interview with a former torturer of the Greek military junta (cited in Crelinsten 1995, 60):

Q: Are there methods of torture which you on no account would have used? Then? At the time?

A: At the time? No, I don't think so. We would have been able to do everything. [...]

Q: Even the worst forms of torture?

A: Yes, regardless.

Q: Even, let us say [...] if they ordered you [...] to torture [a victim's] children before his eyes?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you have done it?

A: Yes, definitely.<sup>6</sup>

Not only can we comprehend Simmel's deeper insight that being a member of a criminal band implies a specific freedom from moral bonds, but we can also agree with Collins' argument that "we can find a key to cruelty in the connection between morality and the boundaries of a group inclusion and exclusion" (1974, 18). Given the complex social relations within this secret society, the very fact of radically cutting off the secret society of torturers from the world outside makes possible the degree of autonomy that develops into cruelty on the part of the torturer, as it is "[the] internal security organization's rational rules, hierarchy, and procedures [that] must dictate his occupational behaviour" (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002, 106).

### 4. Tension of Life and Form: Conditions of Behaviour

In their everyday interactions, individuals necessarily create social forms that are a consequence of creativity, but also constrain their opportunities of behaviour, thereby producing specific opportunity structures. There are three crucial aspects as far as the secret society of torturers is concerned: the decoupling from other associations, domination, and deindividualisation.

<sup>6</sup> The film *Your Neighbour's Son* also addresses the topic of torturers and victims under the Greek military regime; distributed by Amnesty International.

#### 4.1. The Decoupling of the Secret Society from Other Associations

While the wider society (market, state, family, etc.) makes demands on the individual that necessarily generate conflicts and contradictions that have to be solved, the secret society's isolation constrains such problems: "The purposes and programs of secret societies require that competitive interests from that plane of the open society should be left outside the door" (Simmel 1906, 491). This is an important consideration that goes some way towards explaining why psychopathology and charges of barbarism supply such unsatisfactory answers to the question of how people are able to torture others. People "develop personalities and practices through interchanges with other humans, and [...] the interchanges themselves always involve a degree of negotiation and creativity" (Tilly 2003, 5–6). Therefore, we should assume that it is the structural supersession or the secret society's decoupling from all systemic and moral references that make the life of specialists in violence seem detached from "reality". There are no contradictions – just simplicity, no moral considerations – just orders to be obeyed, no reflections on the torturer's personality – just the performance of a single role. Consequently, it is the social form of the secret society of torturers and the way it organises its social relations by detaching both itself and its members from "normal" social life that offer the key to understanding torturers' behaviour.

#### 4.2. Domination

Being both detached from the wider society and a secondary structure within an existing hierarchy of the military or (secret) police, the secret society "exercises a kind of absolute sovereignty over its members. This control prevents conflicts among them which easily arise in the open type of co-ordination." (Simmel 1906, 491–92). Again, the form becomes decisive as it shapes members' behaviour as centralisation triggers the emergence of "unlimited and blind obedience to leaders [...]. The more criminal the purposes of a secret society, the more unlimited is likely to be the power of the leaders, and the more cruel its exercise" (492). There is hardly a secret society whose purpose is more criminal than that of torturers and there seems no way out once a person has become a member:

Like the violence bureaucrat that he was, Armando describes the Militarised Police as having "a hierarchical regimen." Explaining this further, he argues that "a soldier has to obey the hierarchy and the discipline [...]. Whoever has a higher rank in the hierarchy has power" (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002, 12)

The sociological analysis of the secret society's structure shows unmistakably that while torturers indeed act in a context apparently characterised by unlimited moral freedom, their operations are restricted by an extremely rigid command structure that is of utmost importance, particularly in the case of a band of criminals such as torturers. This enormous extent of enforcement and centralised authority also has far-reaching consequences in the event of the secret society being uncovered, as it shows how centralisation of power can be used to the advantage of those holding power:

Ironically, in the case of state-sponsored violence, it is often only the accounts of a few sacrificed lower-ranked violence workers that enter into public memory. The upper-level facilitators who order and promote torture, and sometimes even carry it out themselves, are able to manipulate and control the definition of truth so that any information that threatens their secrets is labelled "illegitimate" and "against the national interest". (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002, 27)

#### 4.3. Deindividualisation

Finally, the specific form of social relations within the secret society has profound consequences for the individual, as unconditional subordination under a centralised authority implies a process of deindividualisation. Being subjugated under a central authority within a rigid hierarchy, being forced to accept and take part in (initiation) rituals, and being exposed to threats and violence, members of the secret society of torturers turn to simple means to achieve the ends of this association. Self-abnegation and a levelling of individuality are important consequences for torturers: being subjugated as individuals reshapes these people, transforming them into characters who lose all their individuality and whose self-abnegation becomes stronger, while the rulers enforce a levelling of the ruled that emphasises the solidarity of the members (see Simmel 1906, 495). This will finally lead to a complete loss of compassion in the members/torturers and a typical state of irresponsibility for their own actions:

Within such an organizational framework, there was no place for emotionality. The rational violence worker could not have positive feelings for a victim, and he even had to modulate his extreme negative feelings so as not to go “too far” with a victim. (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002, 106)

### 5. Dynamics of Processes within the Secret Society of Torturers

The analysis of the secret society of torturers suggests that torture should be recognised as a consequence of a specific and contradictory form of social relations within the association of the secret society: moral freedom versus strictest regulation; individual freedom versus hierarchy and commitment through rituals; feelings of power and superiority versus anonymous leadership and subordination; omnipotence versus deindividuation and self-abnegation.

Concealing and detaching the secret society of torturers from the wider society generates an “inner world” that is isolated from the outside world, the consequence being processes of “internal dynamics” (*Eigendynamik*), a concept that Friedhelm Neidhardt (1981) developed after analysing social processes within the secret society of the Baader-Meinhof group. Complementing Simmel’s ideas of interaction (*Wechselwirkung*), this concept makes it possible to identify the conditions of specific kinds of processes within social systems that are more or less socially closed: first, no external disturbances of the dominant ideas or motives aggravate the secret society’s members or confuse the group’s world view; second, once the internal dynamics in these closed systems are in motion, none of the members can quit the organisation; third, and probably the most importantly, the members of a secret society permanently push each other to go on with what obviously has to be done, thereby generating motives for the whole process to continue. However, internal dynamics within closed social systems such as groups of torturers trigger readjustments of the group’s purpose, leading to paradoxical turns or contradictory developments (see Neidhardt 1981, 251–52).

Nevertheless, as Neidhardt argues, internal dynamics do stabilise a closed social group. As its members are bound to one another by rituals, commitments, a distinct hierarchy, the principle of order and obedience, and the feeling of

being elite and omnipotent, the secret society reconfirms itself, while its members reconfirm each other and remain loyal to their association. As Neidhardt has shown with regard to the internal dynamics within secret societies, these processes cannot be based solely on feelings of loyalty but need a stronger foundation. “Individual motives require mutual support in *systems of meaning* that enable the individual to both interpret his or her world relatively coherently and to legitimise his or her actions for him or herself (253, author’s translation). Such constructions of meaning are facilitated by developing an “everyday theory” that explains to the members of the secret society coherently, simply, and consistently why they are doing what they are doing (254).

In order to preserve the conviction that allows the secret society’s members to go on, two techniques play a crucial role. First, *techniques of rationalising*, or “neutralizing” (Sykes and Matza 1957), and a specific kind of “responsibility” (Scott and Lyman 1968) enable the members to define their own situation as an emergency and allow for a unitary world view. In this state of mind:

[to] have a feeling of being at war simply justifies the moral state of emergency and offers relief through reference to analogies provided in abundance by history’s battlefields. The opponent is the enemy; killing him is a soldier’s duty. Moral consequences can be turned into technical ones. To murder then simply means “to inflict losses”. (Neidhardt 1981, 255, author’s translation).

Second, *techniques of immunising* allow members to separate off experiences outside the secret society, the consequence being a state of *indifference* towards both the world outside and the victims of torture. The violent attack becomes simply functional.

In the case of torture, we have to add that the members of this secret society pass through a socialisation process, since they are not only taught the techniques of torture. Rather, by intensive instruction and indoctrination (Haritos-Fatouros 1991), they internalise both constructions of meaning that plausibly justify their alleged superior identity and the conception of strict “we-they” dichotomies that are preconditions for devaluation and dehumanisation of their potential victims (Asad 1996).

## 6. Contradictions of Behaviour

In the face of all these processes within the secret society of torturers, those who are subordinated to an anonymous authority now themselves turn into anonymous and absolute rulers;<sup>7</sup> they carry their own experience of deindividuation and self-abnegation to the extreme in relation to their victims. As the latter are deprived of their individuality, they are no longer perceived as individuals. Humiliation and subordination under an omnipotent and anonymous power generates a far-reaching closed action system that knows virtually no external disturbances. Once again, Neidhardt's analysis helps us to understand how specific internal dynamics are triggered by the way perpetrators and victims are fixated on one another, with neither of them being able to escape from the system, the fatal consequence being that the asserted original motive of gathering information can easily be superimposed by secondary motives such as feelings of hyper-omnipotence or the sense of having the power of life and death. Again, the social dynamics of this situation are crucial for a better understanding of how and why people become able to torture others. Grüny makes this point: the sense of self is:

highly insecure since it demands a constant continuation of the torture; as soon as it ends, the power of the torturer is terminated. As both the loss of consciousness of the victim and his or her death threaten the possibility of continuing the torture, the perpetrator tries to avoid both these situations. However, since a victim cannot be tortured endlessly, the torturer has to constantly look for new victims. (Grüny 2003, 106, author's translation)<sup>8</sup>

The social situation of torture is thus characterised by highly complex social dynamics: the torturer's self, having been reshaped within the structure and culture of the secret society, is now in a position to reshape the self of the victim in front of him. Thus, we can identify the critical aspects of this situation:<sup>9</sup>

- Absolute power on the part of the torturers corresponds to absolute powerlessness on the part of the victims, indicating the enormous destructiveness of torture: "Among the practices of the modern state, torture is the least understood, one that lures its practitioners, high and low, with fantasies of dominion" (McCoy 2006, 12–13). The intensified asymmetry of power relations between a group of specialists in violence on the one hand and a radically isolated individual on the other opens the door to an extremely destructive form of violence. The victims are unable to defend themselves against their torturers.
- Absolute knowledge on the part of the torturers corresponds to absolute ignorance on the part of the victims. In torture, social relations are no longer aimed at reciprocity and negotiation. Rather, it is the torturers who write the script: "On a tout le temps, dit le commandant, ils sont tous comme ça au début : on mettra un mois, deux mois ou trois mois, mais il parlera" (Alleg [1958a] 2008, 69).<sup>10</sup> It is the torturers who decide what exactly will happen – the victim can only hold out fatalistically.
- Fixed but non-transparent intentions of the torturers are accompanied by victims' efforts to guess these. They think about what will happen next, what the torturers want to know, how they can evade torture, and whether they will survive if they betray others or make false accusations:

The antagonism between perpetrator and victim indicates the extreme limits of social reciprocity. [...] The victim is entirely in the enemy's hand, at the mercy of his rage, lust, and will to annihilation. Violence is unrestricted by any counterforce. Reciprocity is superfluous. (Sofsky 2005, 89, author's translation)

The victims can neither resort to experiences in everyday processes of interaction nor relate these to their current situation. In a radically existential way, the situation of torture is extraordinary.

7 We can take this literally, as many victims of torture have to wear hoods for long periods of time and therefore cannot see their surroundings.

8 This is the very point where torture may turn into an excess, where the torturer knows no limits and sheer cruelty takes over.

9 See Doerr-Zegers et al. 1992 for a psychological perspective. The authors also define an asymmetry of power, anonymity and obscurity with respect to time and space as crucial elements of the torture situation as well as the psychological aspects.

10 "We have time," said the major. "They're all like that at the beginning. We'll take a month, two months, or three months, but he'll talk" (Alleg 1958b, 69).

- Absolute clarity on the part of the torturers corresponds with absolute obscurity on the part of the victims. The victims generally do not know whom they are dealing with, who is standing or sitting opposite them; some do not even know why they are in the hands of torturers. The whole situation remains opaque. Thus, the torturers' domination can be exerted anonymously and becomes infinite:

“What was the problem that caused them to arrest you?” the interrogator asked.

I said I didn't know.

“The Organization isn't stupid,” he said. “It never catches people who aren't guilty. Now think again – what did you do wrong?”

“I don't know,” I said again.” (Chandler 1999, 77)

- Spatial and temporal orientation on the part of the torturers who have a life “outside” and “afterwards”, in other words, move back into a “normal world”, corresponds to a purposeful and systematic disorientation on the part of the victims, for whom there is only a “timeless inside” left: “Make sure they never know where they are. It's a disorientation thing. Whenever you're going somewhere, make sure you spin them around and you blindfold them, and you never take them on a direct route” (interview with an El Salvadoran death squad member, cited in Crelinsten 1995, 50). Victims should not know where they are, how long they will be there, or whether they will ever leave again. And this disorientation also applies to the experience of time: “Je dus m'endormir d'un coup, car, lorsque je le revis, j'eus l'impression qu'un instant seulement s'était écoulé. Et à partir de là, je n'eus plus aucune notion du temps” (Alleg [1958a] 2008, 36).<sup>11</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Stanley Milgram's (1974) well-known experiment shocked the public by showing that two thirds of all participants were willing to torment other persons on the orders of an examiner who told them that the electric shocks (which in

reality would have been lethal) were necessary to induce the subjects to behave in a specific way. Far from restricting the results to “normal persons”' belief in authority, Zimbardo (2009) argues that the “system” in which people act causes their behaviour.

Although we have to admit that there will always be sadists and psychopaths among torturers, this contributes as little towards providing a proper explanation as the idea that obedience of authority turns people into torturers (not to mention the fact that laboratory conditions bear no relation to the processes of reshaping self that create ruthless torturers). However, social psychology is extremely helpful in fleshing out details of a proper explanation, as we learn a great deal about socialising processes, atrocity training, and exercises in obedience, etc. (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002) that support the overall argument of people being able to learn to torture others.

Entering a unit of torturers means stepping into a social situation that triggers a process of both suppressing the self-image and reshaping the self that has to adjust to a new kind of environment. In the course of an initiation process the prospective member of the secret society has to undergo, he or she experiences the omnipotent power of the representatives of the hierarchical and authoritarian organisation. It is within this kind of framework that the individual has to act, to build up a new kind of personal identity and follow rules in order to accomplish given objectives. A number of techniques such as degradation, humiliation, being subjected to violence, and maybe even torture characterise torturers' initiation as a process of “dis-culturation” of the novice.

Within an extreme social situation enhanced by the veil of *secrecy*, the individual is exposed without protection to the emergence of a new kind of identity. However, contrary to Goffman's (1961) conception of a “total institution”, there is for the torturer no fundamental barrier between the world

<sup>11</sup> “I must have fallen asleep suddenly, because, when I saw them again, I had the impression that only an instant had passed. And at this point, I lost all idea of time” (Alleg 1958b, 56).

within the secret society and the “normal” world outside. Rather, they live in both worlds and one might argue that only the strict separation of the two worlds with their completely contradictory rules of conduct permits torturers to have a normal life as fathers and husbands, in other words a social environment that offers (maybe unknowingly) support and encouragement for what allegedly has to be done (cf. Lifton 1986).

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