Review

The prevention of torture: An ecological approach

Danielle Celermajer
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Danielle Celermejer offers one of the most compelling analyses of a wicked political problem that I have read in a long time. By wicked problem I mean not only the tremendous injustice and suffering wrought by the practice of torture, but also how profoundly resistant torture is to efforts to prevent it. The brilliance of Celermajer's work lies in its incisive theorization of an ecological approach to preventing torture. From this perspective, she reconceives human rights theory and practice in a way that not only takes individual causes of torture into account, but also brings the structural, institutional, cultural, and situational causes seriously into our analyses of why torture happens and how we might create multi-systemic interventions that halt its occurrence. In the process, Celermajer forges promising paths at the intersections between theory and practice.

Equally important, her example suggests an ecological approach to the ethical-political practice of theorizing itself. Celermajer's book does not explicitly articulate this latter offering – it shows rather than tells of it. Yet at the time when how we approach our scholarship and the world is often (dis)oriented by myopic professionalism or grandiose pretentiousness, her text provides a constellation that suggests another way of going. Her politics of theorizing is just as important as her political theory, and it generates many of her substantive insights.

Celermajer's thinking is drawn by an ever-present constellation of tensional concerns and aspirations that keep her from getting hung up on the shoals of myopic pragmatism, on the one hand, or grand gestures of critique and utopia whose very condition of possibility hinges on remaining at an infinite distance from the world. While both her critical analysis and her generative insights provide radical alternatives to those that are dominant in the human rights literature and practice around torture prevention, she never allows this radicality to carry her to sever relational threads with many who are situated inside these discursive practices. She repeatedly takes care to show human rights practitioners and theorists that her alternative approach is in fact attentive to their most basic

concerns and consonant with their highest aspirations. Moreover, even as she strives in every word and deed to advance paths beyond torture, she seeks to do so in ways that solicit the engagement of some of those within institutions that have fostered ongoing torture, in ways that are highly attentive to their internal logics – precisely in order to transform them. Her impatience to transcend the horror is intertwined with her patient, aikido-like working through patterns of immanence with a transformative intimacy. Celermajer's most visionary theoretical moves thus enhance arts of vernacularization. Her systemic insights and actor network orientations are perpetually mindful not to extinguish individual agency, nor to absolve the guilt of those who torture. While the transformative energies of her approach might move many toward peaks of remote finger wagging, she instead travels toward the populated, messy world of actors with invitational energies. Her text enlivens rather than masters its readers, calling a motley crew to an iterative, collaborative, supremely difficult journey explicitly informed by her failures, as well as her most promising steps forward.

Celemajer's text begins by surveying the principal approaches to preventing torture, including the different schools of intervention. One school focuses on enacting legal sanctions and ensuring a process of punishing perpetrators – from trials, to convictions, to jail time— that would end impunity and alter the incentive structures that currently allow and foster torture. Yet it typically gives insufficient attention to a broad range of political, institutional, and cultural factors that would need to be addressed in order to effectively create and sustain such changes. A second school is centered on non-accusatory monitoring, by which an external body gains official access to detention sites, carefully researches and documents what is going on, and confidentially reports its finding to the authorities. In this way, they hope to build relationships and constructive dialog with state actors, which foster reforms through the pressure of witness. Yet the theory of change employed by this school is vague and also fails to address the challenges posed by weak, fragmented, and pathological institutions. The third and most prominent school of intervention employs accusatory monitoring, or 'naming and shaming', in the hope that generating pressures external to the state – from outrage in civil society to international condemnation – will generate political will inside the state to cease torture. Yet, like the non-accusatory approach, this school is inattentive to both the fragmented character of institutions and the complex set of interactions between systems, institutions, and actors that foster torture and hamper efforts to abolish it.

Celermajer offers a careful evaluation of the efficacy of these different strategies and finds that they have been 'in some ways misdirected, inadequate, or flawed' (p. 4). The human rights framework within which they operate tends to focus too heavily upon punishing individual perpetrators and the agency of individual leaders as the locus of change. Charged perpetrator-victim narratives often lead to moral condemnation against those who seek other approaches and charges that they erode demands for accountability and responsible decision-making. Yet torture persists

and is indeed becoming a more acceptable option in the minds of public as well as government leaders around the world. This discrepancy has led to many sharp criticisms of the human rights framework for not only failing to address structural causes of torture (neo-imperialism, neoliberalism, global capitalism, etc.), but also for unwittingly enabling these causes by actively rendering them invisible.

While Celermajer is sympathetic to many of these insights, she is critical of how the sweeping character of critical analysis tends to focus exclusively upon the macro in a way that 'not only lacks practical import, but even within its own conceptual framework is overly definitive and fatalist' (p. 7). Such critics' calls for sweeping change tend to remain too grandiose, in the sense that they separate macro systemic dynamics from the nitty-gritty aspects of institutions, cultures, and situations that are simultaneously integral to their continuation and indispensable sites for generating change. She argues that macro structures always exist in co-constitutive relations with meso- and micro-processes. Thus, creating change hinges upon analyses and interventions that work across all these levels rather than those that cling tightly to a single level and dismiss those concerned with the others. The challenge is to pull the human rights idea beyond its contingent individualist renderings, and reimagine it in ways that are 'able to articulate and operationalize responses to the complex interplay of structural, systemic and individual causes and conditions' (p. 6). This sets the course for the rest of the book.

Celermajer's ecological approach draws upon insightful and idiosyncratic readings of philosophies of causality, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, and more, to negotiate the relations between agency and structure. With Bourdieu, she develops a theory of habitus in which individuals are dialectically constituted through engagements in institutions and practices that form durable and transposable dispositions, perceptions, thought patterns, and improvisational action repertoires. Yet individuals are not determined but rather assimilate their contexts in unpredictable ways. They may adjust or occasionally even radically reform institutions as they draw upon discrepant sensibilities and capacities formed in a variety of fields of practice. With Latour, she cultivates the need for fine-grained attention to the details of 'highly local and particularized sites of association' (p. 224) through which agencies are formed in complex, profoundly material processes. Each sort of agency forms as a node of interacting entities with different sorts of agentic characteristics.

Drawing upon this rich theoretical array, the ecological approach orients us toward variegated analyses and interventions attuned to the interactive specificities of the organizations in which torture occurs (e.g., whether those in detention have access to legal counsel and visitors from the outside; the working conditions of rank and file officers and whether they are abused by higher-ups; the pedagogical logics and incentive structures at play in institutions), the cultures of torture and violence in which they have situational resonance (e.g., the broader ethos of mundane torture practices such as slaps and beatings in organizations, policing, schools, and

families), the materiality of stress for both workers and detainees in institutions that facilitate torture, whether police have access to non-confessional investigation equipment, and the insistent imperatives passed downward from powerful state and economic actors.

In the last third of the book this theoretical apparatus is brought into relation with her torture intervention fieldwork in Sri Lanka and Nepal conducted by a team she formed with the support of a grant from the European Union. What I find most remarkable here is not only how it illuminates the complexity of the field, but how her experiences set in motion an iterative reflexive process with respect to theoretical and pragmatic difficulties of her own approach. The depth and candor of Celermajer's reflections on myriad challenges – from structural inflexibilities lodged in pre-commitments to a course of action for funders, to difficulties of gaining access, to the deceptive engagements on the part of some participants, to the tremendous weight of macro political imperatives, to the difficult-yet-essential requirement to narrow down systemic interventions, to the ways this narrowing can lead to interventions that have too little influence – all generate insights that are of indispensable value for those conducting field work. They are indispensable too, for modeling how acknowledging and engaging with our failures is crucial for enhancing our powers, both to theorize and to address the horrors of the world.

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