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# Review of Torture: A Sociology of Violence and Human Rights by Lisa Hajjar

Jared Del Rosso  
*University of Denver*

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**Book Review**  
**Torture: A Sociology of Violence and Human Rights**  
**By**  
**Lisa Hajjar**

**Jared Del Rosso**  
University of Denver

Routledge

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Lisa Hajjar's *Torture: A Sociology of Violence and Human Rights* is part of Routledge's "Framing 21st Century Social Issues" series, which aims to provide undergraduates with brief, "student-friendly" texts that "introduce basic concepts in the social sciences, cover key literature in the field, and offer original analyses and diagnoses." (x) When approaching Hajjar's latest contribution to the sociology of torture, it is important to keep these purposes in mind. The text is slight and easily digested. Keywords are bolded and clearly defined in the text and the Glossary/Index. Just as importantly, the book is fairly priced. *Torture* succeeds as an undergraduate text for these reasons, as well as for its substance.

Hajjar offers, in her opening chapter, that she can turn any conversation to torture "within minutes." I am not so brazen, but I have had the opportunity to teach a course on torture at three institutes over the last five years. I also teach the topic in introductory sociology, deviance, and state violence. I immediately recognized a number of core themes from these courses in *Torture*. Indeed, the book opens where my course on torture opens: the recent history of U.S. torture. I am grateful for this chapter, as I have struggled to find a single reading that effectively summarizes the policy decisions, scandals, and debates of the past decade. Hajjar's chapter does just that. Though not quite exhaustive; it does not address, for instance, the CIA's (destroyed) videotapes of its interrogations, the torture of Mohammed al-Qahtani at Guantánamo, or the impact of leaked International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reports on public discourse, though some of these are discussed later in *Torture*. Even so, the chapter is sufficient to introduce students to the study of "enhanced interrogation," especially if supplemented with a few key sources. Importantly, this chapter also introduces students to consequentialist and deontological arguments for and against torture. I use these terms in my teaching and students benefit from learning them, as they can identify their own positions on torture as representative or variants of these ethical frameworks. Here, these frameworks are clearly defined and applied to the American debate. Undergraduates in sociology courses, who often lack a background in moral philosophy and,

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increasingly, recall little of early-21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. politics, will benefit tremendously from this chapter.

Subsequent chapters introduce students to the historical uses and eventual abolition of torture in Europe and the U.S., the persistence of torture in the 20th century, the emergence of international human rights law governing torture, the challenges of enforcing those laws, and the ways that torture damages victims, perpetrators, and societies. With the exception of the final chapter on the harms of torture, these chapters emphasize the relationship between the state, law, and torture. Indeed, one of the core arguments developed throughout the book is that the right not to be tortured is the most universal right afforded humans, as it applies to all human beings regardless of their identity and is, unlike the prohibition on killing civilians in war, absolute. This is a provocative and important claim that is well-theorized and effectively supported through Hajjar's review of the harms of torture. It may, I think, complicate students' arguments for or against torture, which students tend to base primarily on whether or not they believe that torture "works."

Given Hajjar's emphasis on socio-legal issues, *Torture* is better suited for courses in the sociology of law or human rights than it is for general sociology courses. I will, for instance, consider integrating this text into future iterations of my courses on torture, state violence, and legal institutions. If I were to teach torture as a "case" in a course on collective behavior, social problems, deviance, or crime, I would likely look elsewhere for readings, as *Torture* largely overlooks the social psychological, organizational, and structural contexts of torture. Hajjar refers to these topics when discussing the harms of torture, but does not integrate them into the text's explanation for why torture persists in modern world. This is a missed opportunity, since such topics allow students to build bridges between the study of torture and classic ideas in sociology, such as Durkheim's theories of punishment, Weber's of bureaucracy, Merton's of anomie, and Milgram's of obedience. This limitation of Hajjar's text reflects, I think, a broader, disciplinary gap. With a few exceptions, torture has been studied as a form of exceptional state violence. And yet torture, as both a criminal and deviant act, has micro, organizational, and structural explanations, many of which are consistent with social scientists' explanations for less exceptional forms of deviance. Lacking discussion of these issues, *Torture* would have to be supplemented with additional sources to adequately generalize the topic.

A second limitation of *Torture* relates to the book's relative lack of inserts, figures, and images. Torture is a topic that may be illustrated with public domain documents—images and excerpts from legal documents, memoranda, and investigations. *Torture*, however, makes little use of such resources. There are six images in the book, including an image from Guantánamo, two from Abu Ghraib, and one of the

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Rwandan genocide. These images are minimally integrated into the text, begging the question of why images which hint at or outright show torture were used in the first place. Reading *Torture*, I felt that the book would have been more compelling and useful to undergraduates had it included and integrated a range of additional materials. I have found, for instance, that students benefit from comparing Abu Zubaydah's account of his waterboarding to the descriptions offered by the Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel. This juxtaposition of accounts—one a first-hand description of the physical impact of waterboarding, the other a bureaucratic description—enriches discussions of denial. The juxtaposition also familiarizes students with the reality underlying the ambiguous word “waterboarding.” Even an “additional resources” section that directs students to online versions of key documents would have benefitted *Torture*.

Despite these reservations, I believe that Lisa Hajjar has done instructors of human rights and state violence a great service by producing this brief, coherent, and approachable introduction to torture. Students will find the chapters enlightening *and* manageable. Instructors will find them teachable, too, as the chapters introduce themes on which one may build both lectures and discussions. If *Torture: A Sociology of Violence and Human Rights* is representative of Routledge's “Framing 21st Century Social Issues” series, then sociology instructors have a rich and exciting resource on which to draw.

**Jared Del Rosso** is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Denver. He has studied the impact of evidence and the role of culture in the U.S. Congress's debate about torture. His work on these areas has been published in *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*, and *Sociological Forum*.