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Torture and Racism
A Brief Insight into an Age-Old and Intimate Relationship

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Abstract At the basis of the development of capitalism, fed from the beginning with low-cost and high-productivity labour, there are two elements that operate in symbiosis: racism and torture. One feeds on the other, because both are an expression of the same hierarchical violence, created and applied with the aim to subjugate, control and devalue the workforce. This essay aims to explore the historical and intimate link between torture and racism, also putting into play an important analytical category: political economy.

Keywords Torture. Racism. Violence. Exploitation. Social classes.

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> "The great truth of our time is that our continent is giving way to barbarism because private ownership of the means of production is being maintained by violence. Merely to recognize this truth is not sufficient, but should it not be recognized, no other truth of importance can be discovered. Of what use is to write something courageous which shows that the condition into which we are falling is barbarous (which is true) if it is not clear why we are falling into this condition? We must say that torture is used in order to preserve property relations. To be sure, when we say this, we lose a great many friends who are against torture only because they think property relations can be upheld without torture, which is untrue" (Brecht 1966, 149-50)

> "The political police used torture systematically, it being its main weapon of 'investigation'. Isolations, beatings, sleep torture and statue torture were the most common practices, according to class criteria, reserving particular violence to the workers and peasants" (Inscription at the entrance of the Resistance Museum in Lisbon)

1 Introduction

This essay aims to explore the historical and structural link between torture and racism, also putting into play an important analytical category: political economy. The concept of torture used is not limited to the various legal formulations; torture is here understood as a social phenomenon and, as a consequence, it is considered as systematic violence, both physical and psychological, exerted by States in order to achieve their aims (Cohen, Corrado 2005; Rejali 2003). This perspective also reveals the specific approach taken: despite the fact that it has been stated in literature that torture serves "several purposes" (Skoll 2010, 83) and that, indeed, there are several types of torture – interrogation torture, warning/deterrent torture, dehumanising torture (Tindale 1996), otherwise known as "terrorist torture" (Hajjar 2013, 23) – in this work the idea is shared that torture does not concern the need of States to extract information from the throats of the tortured – as correctly stated by Elaine Scarry: "confession is not the goal" (1985, 29) – but which, on the contrary, always has as its ultimate objective the *dehumanisation* of the victims and the social groups to which they belong, the control and devaluation of their workforce, and the increase in economic productivity. It is on this very ground that the intimate and indissoluble union between torture and racism takes place.

2 Modern Racism is Nothing but (Systematic) Violence

It is not easy to find your way through the jungle of definitions of *racism* and *torture*. Theoretical stratifications, disciplinary boundaries and ideological orientations make the ground slippery and uneasy. Yet, without prior clarity on this plan, it is impossible to move in the given direction.

Our review can only start with the concept of racism. Pierre-André Taguieff (1998), French sociologist, philosopher and historian, defines as *narrow-modernist* the body of theories – elaborated between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – that consider racism as a set of doctrines, ideologies and behaviours that legitimise the hierarchies between human groups and individuals on the basis of the belief that physical and genetic characteristics determine psychological, intellectual and moral traits. The same opinion is shared by anthropologist Claude Lévy-Strauss, according to whom *ideal-typical racism* is "a doctrine that claims to see, in the intellectual and moral characters attributed to a set of individuals however defined, the necessary effect of a common genetic heritage" (Lévy-Strauss, Eribon 1990, 207).[1]

In the early 1980s a new definition of racism in the social sciences emerged. This considers the classic version (based on the colour of the skin, the shape of the skull, the body etc.) to be outdated, as it would no longer be able to describe the social phenomenon after the end of historical colonialism. In this period, indeed, the 'new racism' would no longer seek its foundation in genetics. To justify social hierarchies, it relies on other categories, such as 'culture' and 'nation'.

The first to identify the key elements of the historical *mutation* of racism was Martin Barker in his book *The New Racism. Conservatives and the Ideology of the Tribe* (1982). He was followed by Pierre-André Taguieff and Étienne Balibar. The former identifies, in his book *La force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles* (1988), the existence of two types of racism: the 'traditional' one, based essentially on genetics and aiming at the inferiorisation of groups and individuals, and the 'differentialist' one, i.e., *neo-racism*, which is not limited to inferiority, it aims at the destruction of the victims.

Balibar shares Taguieff's idea and in his important work (written with Immanuel Wallerstein), *Race, Nation, Classe. Les identités ambiguës* (1988), states that *neo-racism*, that of the era of decolonisation, shall be qualified as "racism without races". This qualification must be understood in the twofold meaning that Balibar attributes to it: the first, dictated by the teaching of Lévy-Strauss (1971), considers culture as an element that can function as 'nature' – "La cul-

1 All translations in the text are by the Author, unless otherwise noted.

ture peut elle aussi fonctionner comme une nature" (Balibar 1988, 22) – and the second is intended to highlight the fact that *cultural difference* is now in the foreground of the racist discourse, pushing the biological-genetic aspect to the background. Balibar emphasises the fact that *neo-racism* can only partially be called culturalist and that nature does not disappear from its horizon at all. Balibar, in fact, defines anti-Semitism as a typical example of *differentialist racism*.

Michel Wieviorka (1991) later explained how the cultural and biological form of racism have always gone hand in hand, considering the existence of biological races irrelevant in the study of the phenomenon. On this point, Wieviorka draws on the reflection of sociologist Colette Guillamin (1972), who had widely explained how the real sociological problem with races lies in the fact that *imaginary races* and *real races* play the same role in the social process and, consequently, have an identical social function.

All these definitions, traditional and new – beyond the specific differences – are united by the fact that racism is conceived as a *doctrine*, an *ideology*, both when it is considered as the result of the relationship with otherness and when it is thought of as the product of a particular social and political system (such as colonialism). And that's where the *problem* lies.

Thinking of racism as a *doctrine* is typical of those who only know racism as an experience lived by others; from this position, indeed, it is possible to grasp only the justifying and legitimising (i.e., ideological) dimension of racism. It understands the words surrounding the situation, but does not feel the shock of the phenomenon. Those who suffer racism perceive violence first and foremost, both physical and symbolic. Such violence is often mixed with (justifying) words, but very often – at least if the history of racism is taken into account – these words belong to unknown languages. Thus, the *ideological* aspect of racism tends to be moved to the background, as an element surrounding violence.

Therefore, if there is a dualism in the definition of racism, this does not appear to be based so much on the difference between *biological* and *cultural* racism, but rather on the position taken by the person analysing it:[2] standing behind colonial armies, racists, one will perceive racism above all through the words that justify it; standing before them, alongside the colonised, the victims, one will feel, first of all, violence. Racism could be perceived in its operational dimension, recognising it above all as *racism-operation*.

2 This is not only a theoretical clarification of the definition of racism, but also an important methodological question, with which we need to deal every time we analyse this social phenomenon.

Almost all scholars agree that *modern racism* is born with colonialism, which is, in turn, the basis of the genesis and reproduction of capitalism. As Karl Marx pointed out, capitalism and colonialism were born on the same day:

> The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterise the down of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. (1976, 915)

Several scholars have shown that the concept of race was almost unknown before colonialism. Authors such as Hosea Jaffe (1985), Alfred W. Crosby (1986), David E. Stannard (1992), Tzvetan Todorov (1999) have explained how capitalist colonialism gave birth to and developed *race theory*, the psychology of racial prejudice linked to genetic factors and the practice of racism at every level. Immanuel Wallerstein confirms this, adding that this sort of racism has nothing to do with foreigners or xenophobia, because it is not produced by a cultural feeling or attitude, but rather by the structural necessity of capitalism to create hierarchies everywhere:

> What we mean by racism has little to do with the xenophobia that existed in various prior historical systems. Xenophobia was literally fear of the stranger. Racism within historical capitalism had nothing to do with strangers. Quite the contrary. Racism was the mode by which various segments of the work force within the same economic structure were constrained to relate to each other. (1983, 78)

The construction of races according to a hierarchical order, which emphasises the superiority of whites over all others, was consolidated with the spread of slavery. Without slavery, as Marx explained, one cannot understand capitalism, whose origin lies as much in wage labour as in the slave labour of colonised populations:

> Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry. It is slavery which has given values to the colonies, it is the colonies which have created world trade. (Marx, Engels 1934, 101)

To rob the lands and resources of the colonies as well as to enslave the local labour force, ideology alone was not enough. The cultural and psychological conviction of colonisers about the inferiority of the

colonised could not be enough to exploit them into camps and mines, to reduce them to sub-humans. Such result is achieved by violence. Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the first to grasp this profound truth of racism. He explains that racism is not – and never can be – a simple *ideology*, because it is always, in all circumstances, *violence*. However, it is not 'simple' violence, but rather complex violence, capable of carrying within its DNA its own justification.

> Racism has to become a practice: it is not contemplation awakening the significations engraved on things; it is in *itself* self-justifying violence: violence presenting itself as induced violence, counter-violence and legitimate defence. (Sartre 2004, 720; emphasis in the original)

Sartre's precise and vigorous definition changes the lenses through which we analyse and measure modern racism. If racism is understood as violence, its primary source is inevitably to be found in the State. The monopoly on the legitimate use of physical (Weber 1946, 78) and symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1993; 2014), as we know, belongs to the State. This does not eliminate the role of other actors in the field, but none of them, in the end, would be able to attach a structural, extensive and lasting character to the phenomenon without State intervention. After all, in the colonies, occupation, land confiscation, the expulsion of labourers, slavery, forced labour, political-administrative institutions, health policies, education… up to repression (and torture) were all operations which were financially supported, legally authorised and concretely carried out by the colonising States. Sartre underlines:

> Racism is inscribed in the events themselves, in the institutions, in the nature of the exchanges and the production. The political and social statuses reinforce one another: since the natives are subhuman, the Declaration of Human Rights does not apply to them: conversely, since they have no rights, they are abandoned without protection to the inhuman forces of nature, to the 'iron laws' of economics. (Sartre 2001, 21)

The colonial system – Sartre continues – is complex and "depends on overexploitation" (Sartre 1963, 8). Its survival is guaranteed by the dehumanisation of the exploited. Racism represents the main element, the hidden secret for achieving this goal, because it is aimed at structurally and violently oppressing and, at the same time, breaking and humiliating the colonised/exploited, destroying their courage, will and intelligence. In its essence lies a dehumanising violence that wants to keep its victim between life and death, it wants to *cancel* it but never completely (hence also its ambiguous relationship with

death), because the victim must always continue to serve and work, to obey orders, but like a *beast*, like a *zombie*. From this perspective, i.e., from the perspective of the colonised/racialised, abstract categorisations of racism – of the *biological* or *cultural* type – appear somewhat irrelevant, if not even misleading:

> The activity of racism is a *praxis* illuminated by a 'theory' ('biological', 'social' or empirical racism, it does not matter which) aiming to keep the masses in a state of molecular aggregation, and to use every possible means to increase the 'sub-humanity' of the natives. (Sartre 2004, 721)

Racism was therefore an indispensable mechanism for maximising profits in the colonies, but it also played a central role in the hierarchy and division of the working class in Europe and elsewhere. As Cedric J. Robinson (2000) pointed out, the racialisation in Europe – starting from the sixteenth century – of Irish, Slav, Roma, Polish, and Italian immigrants, was a process parallel to the colonial one, if not even earlier. It can be affirmed, following Satnam Virdee, that the essential function of modern racism is to set in motion, everywhere, a systematic and violent "process of differentiation and hierarchical reordering of the global proletariat" (Virdee 2019, 22).

3 Torture, the Ultimate Truth of Racism

Michel de Certeau (2006), paraphrasing anthropologist Pierre Clastres – "In primitive societies, torture is the essence of the initiation ritual" (1989, 182) – states that torture is the *initiation* par excellence to the "reality of social practices" (de Certeau 2006, 200). Indeed, several historical, anthropological and sociological studies have shown that torture is not a recent phenomenon. Executions, torture and mutilation are phenomena that have characterised human societies since the Iron Age, characterised by stratifications around forms of patrimonial governance. The domination relations resulting from stratification have ended up transforming the moral boundaries delineated along ethnic/religious lines into the boundaries of patrimonial stratification. Thus, the violent punishment of groups in the lower layers by those in the upper layers was represented as self-defence of the dominant group, thus assuming a positive moral value (Collins 1974, 421). This is where the lasting public feature of mutilation, torture and executions originated: by witnessing the violence, the dominated groups learned, in a traumatic way, their place in the social hierarchy.

Subsequently, torture has gradually stabilised in ancient societies until it became a structural part of legal systems:

> For centuries law and torture have represented a mismatched yet faithful and affectionate couple. Torture has long been a part of criminal procedural law, and legal libraries are full of scholarly discussions on how and when torture should be applied in the judicial process. For several centuries torture has been a subject of teaching and, yes, of study and research in the faculties of Law. Several great jurists have been torture theorists and in some cases even torturers themselves. (La Torre, Lalatta Costerbosa 2013)

In ancient Greece, torture was the means through which evidence was obtained during a trial, a kind of truth test, which could only be used against certain social categories: slaves and foreigners. Torture, indeed, was not allowed against free citizens. Lisa Hajjar, in her book *Torture. A Sociology of Violence and Human Rights* (2013), lists the reasons behind this particular treatment of slaves (and foreigners):

> The rationales for slave torture were premised on ideas that (a) a slave's servile status made it impossible for him or her to make spontaneously truthful statements because (b) fear of being punished by the owner would incline the slave to lie, and therefore (c) only through pain would slaves speak truth. Tortured statements from slaves were evidence, not confessions (admissions of one's own criminal behavior). (Hajjar 2013, 16-17)

The situation in ancient Rome was very similar. Roman law, from the beginning, considered the torture of slaves lawful. With the consolidation of the empire and the overall division of society into *honestiores* (the ruling class) and *humiliores* (all the others), the base of the torturable population also expanded: *humiliores* could be subjected to trial torture and those convicted could suffer punishments that were once reserved for slaves only (Hajjar 2013). Edward Peters (1996) highlights that, as time went by, the torture of *honestiores* also became admissible, but only with reference to particular types of serious crimes, such as treason.

In ancient Greece and in the Roman Empire, the torturable population represented the majority of the entire population, because this was essentially "slaves from Greece, Rome, the Balkans, and the northern Mediterranean" (Jaffe 2010, 36). The social structure and slave mode of production – a typically European characteristic (Jaffe 2010) – rested on the overexploitation and "often tyrannical abuse of slaves" (Jaffe 2010, 36). In such a system, torture had a triple function: (1) officially mark the lower *status* of slaves and *humiliores*, i.e., those on whom the entire production system rested; (2) exploit the pedagogical power of torture to teach everyone submission to authority; (3) divide society into two distinct social groups: the *torturable* and the *non-torturable*.

In Piero Fiorelli's historical essay, *La tortura giudiziaria nel diritto comune* (1953), the close link between torture and social class was effectively highlighted:

> the serious social inequalities that were preserved in that time led to the substitution of ordeals with means of proofs that differed from class to class. Testimony was the key piece of evidence. But the free man had to validate it with his own oath and with other people's guarantee; the slave was not believed if he had not confirmed it among the spasms of torture. Slaves were things. As they were things, one could not logically admit that they recognised the innate power of truth and the sanctity of the oath. As they were things, one could not test their truthfulness except with evidence of material suffering. (Fiorelli 1953, 13)

It can be affirmed, therefore, that the tortured people of antiquity belonged – in the vast majority of cases – to the poorest and most exploited social classes, whose members were not recognised as human qualities, since they were considered as objects, *reified* beings. Torture played the role of *social demarcator* in this context: "slave economies have always involved deliberate physical torment, and it is difficult to imagine organising slavery in a way in which such pain would be an incidental feature" (Rejali 2009, 38).

In the early Middle Ages slaves and *humiliores* – including those in the barbarian kingdoms (Levack 2015) – continued to retain the status of *torturable class*, but the private conception of crimes and the criminal trial, the contamination of law with that of other northern populations and the segmentation of power and property led to a partial 'silence' of torture (La Torre, Lalatta Costerbosa 2013). It was in the late Middle Ages, indeed, that judicial torture returned to the scene in order to continue to strike with greater intensity the same social classes, but selecting within these specific subjects: *women*. It is at this moment that the history of torture intertwines with that of witchcraft. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, women became the privileged target of torture, through which a fully-fledged war was waged against them (Sallmann 1991; Ginzburg 1973; Vivan 1972). Torture, indeed, transformed the *witch hunt* into a mass social phenomenon (Levack 2015). The tortured were women from the poorest social classes (Federici 2021) and not infrequently, they were elderly.

> The weaker class, that of elderly, strange, widowed, single and poor women, is usually the scapegoat of social panic, fed by the political authority for its own security, to explain and neutralise natural disasters and epidemics, but also the crisis of the poorer classes in the face of the birth of agricultural capitalism. (La Torre, Lalatta Costerbosa 2013)

The *witch hunt* took place in a particular context, full of monumental social changes. The unprecedented spread of poverty was at the root of the radical transformation of both rural and urban life. The three types of rising capitalism – agricultural, commercial and industrial – demanded the creation of a cheap labour market, which in turn required the construction of a strongly hierarchical social system (Geremek 1986). The *witch hunt* was one of the answers to the growing needs of the new production system: it aimed to devalue the female labour force, the most requested by the 'free' market together with that of children, and at the same time to impose a gender hierarchy within the nascent class of 'free' workers. The link between torture and witchcraft hides, in its countless folds, the link between torture and capital.

It should not be forgotten that the strong return of torture as an instrument of control of the poor and exploited classes in Europe occurs at the same time as the colonisation of the Americas. Luciano Parinetto, a profound connoisseur of the phenomenon of witchcraft in the West, was able to shed light on the close relationship between witch hunting, the overexploitation of colonised populations and the capitalist system of production:

> The great persecutions of witches in the West are not the horrible legacy of 'dark' twisted Middle Ages, polluting the light of the Renaissance and the dawn of the modern age, but, instead, a conscious application of political methods of extermination, in view of domination, successfully experimented by power during the bloody events of subjugation of the Amerindian peoples, by the first colonisers of America, and exported to old Europe, always in view of the imposition of domination. The original capital, that is, bewitches the Old and the New World, not only to dominate/annihilate any attempt of opposition or rebellion, but by finding in the badly paid (or even forced) work of the Indians (survivors of a huge carnage) the very scheme through which it will start the masses of the wretched, the beggars, the different of the Old World on the path of the so-called 'free market of free labour', which are the very basis of valorisation. So the witch […] unexpectedly becomes one of the original figures of the so-called 'free work of capital'! (Parinetto 1997, 8)

In the Americas, white slave traders classified African slaves as *animal race* through torture. It branded, atrophied the bodies (and souls) of the black, made them servile, submissive, bent, which was a confirmation of their position of inferiority. At the same time, torture was the most important 'technology' to increase capitalist production. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman's recent book, *Slavery's Capitalism. A New History of American Economic Development* (2016), demolishes in a documented and convincing way the (rather widespread) idea

that torture is an inefficient economic tool. One cannot really know the history of the development of capitalism in the United States, as well as in the entire West, without taking due account of the central role of torture, not only as an instrument of oppression and hierarchical division of workers (*slaves* and *non-slaves*), but also as an effective technique for increasing productivity:

> One of the most astounding productivity improvements during the nineteenth century had nothing to do with machinery but rather with the human capacity to perform agricultural labor with one's hands. According to Edward Baptist, the daily amount of cotton that enslaved men or women picked increased 400 percent between the 1810s and the 1850s, owing to advances in the disciplinary technologies brought to bear on plantation management. Baptist proposes 'torture' as the most apt explanation for the new efficiencies of field labor. The violence of the lash, in the field and in the weighing house, pushed workers to ever-greater feats of picking. Most notably, daily quotas were not determined by customary measurements ("the task") but were set individually, written on slate boards where they could be adjusted upward based on the previous day's intake. Baptist considers the bodily alienation besetting a novice picker attempting to make his two hands work independently of one another as he moved down a row, and then turns to the largest macroeconomic questions of the West's economic takeoff. Access to slave-grown cotton, not simply coal reserves, provided the bases for the so-called Great Divergence, thereby making the violence of the plantation central to economic modernity itself. And in this story, no technology was more important than the whip. (Beckert, Rockman 2016, 15)

Thinking of torture as a *technology* to discipline labour and increase productivity, enables a parallel with what Marx wrote, where, taking the logic of capitalist exploitation to its extreme consequences, he describes the condition of the factory worker and his relationship with the machine as a form of torture:

> Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; at the same time, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity. Even the lightening of the labour becomes an instrument of torture, since the machine does not free the worker from the work, but rather deprives the work itself of all content. (Marx 1976, 548)

At the basis of the development of capitalism in the West, fed from the beginning with low-cost and high-productivity labour, there are

two elements that operate (almost) in symbiosis: racism and torture. One feeds on the other, because both are an expression of the same hierarchical violence, created and applied with the aim to subjugate, control and devalue the workforce, besides increasing productivity.

Torture is the most extreme and abominable form of violence; in this sense, if you think of racism as violence, then it can only be the extreme truth of racism. Without systemic racial hatred, torture as a mass social phenomenon cannot be achieved. Torture and racism share a common thread: reduce humans into sub-humans. Both have an intimate connection with the inhuman and entertain an ambiguous relationship with death.

4 The Bodies of Those Tortured (in Modernity) Are Racialised Bodies

Henri Alleg, author of *La question* (1958), during an interview in 2014, explained his approach to torture: "What we should concentrate on is not the moral question, i.e., should torture be used or not be used. The real question is: why are people being brought to use torture?" (Célérier 2014, 157). This question has the merit of subtracting torture from abstract or moralistic analysis. Alleg, indeed, does not consider it an accident of history, expression of the innate wickedness of human beings, or as an extreme manifestation of the deviant behaviours of individuals; on the contrary, it attributes to it the character of a historical-social phenomenon. Claiming the existence of a drive inducing some people to use torture means to assume that in modernity there are dynamics (objective and subjective) or forces capable of creating the conditions for the realisation of torture and that, consequently, it plays some function in the reproduction of this model of society. If these dynamics or forces are real, the effort to identify them can only start from the analysis of the object of torture, i.e., the tortured, by those on whom all its violence is discharged.

We have to break into the torture chamber to get to know the victims. Tears, tiredness, bruises, fractured limbs, burnt skin, dripping blood, broken teeth and all the other signs of violence thrown at them shall not distract us; knowing the tortured people means, first and foremost, knowing their social history, who they were before they were tortured. To do this, it is not enough to see the torture reports (when they exist), which record their nationality, gender and age at most.

One could object by pointing out that the social history of the victims does not count when they enter the *torture room*. In there, the victims are stripped of everything, of every identity, because the main target is their bodies and, as we know, bodies are all alike in their biological substance. There, power penetrates directly in-

to the bodies, becoming what Michel Foucault (2008) called biopolitics. This is understood as a practice of exercising power (developed in the West since the seventeenth century) towards human beings as a *population*, which regulates and disciplines both the *body-organism* of individuals and the *body-species* of the population. The social history of bodies is an *omissis* in the Foucauldian biopolitics; it is no coincidence, indeed, that there is no mention of the *body-class*. The body of a farmhand is not considered dissimilar to that of a landowner. In *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (2020), for instance, where the metamorphosis of punitive systems is analysed, Foucault opens his reflection by describing in detail the torment of Damien, condemned "to make the *amende honorable* before the main door of the Church of Paris" (Foucault 2020). He goes on several pages to illustrate how a condemned man in 1757 was publicly tortured and then quartered, piece by piece, with the instruments of the time, until his death. He informs us of the role and activities of the technicians around the condemned man, who are socially qualified: you can meet the executioner Samson, Chancellor Le Breton, confessors, helpers, and other *technical* figures. Damien-the *tortured* man, on the other hand, is not socially qualified, nothing is known about his job or social status; the only thing we know is that he was a parricide. Damien's slowly ripped body could belong to anyone, a poor person or a rich one, a carpenter or a banker. Foucault does not fail, however, a few pages later, to inform readers of the fact that, in modernity,

> it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (Foucault 2020)

This statement is important because it puts the sphere of production in direct relation with that of the repressive/punitive system, but it seems to be more of a surface annotation than a central instrument of Foucault's analysis, in which the dimension of political economy is almost non-existent. Nor does his judgement change with the lectures given at the Collège de France between 1978-79 and later published in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault 2008), where he deploys liberalism to explain biopolitics. The liberalism of which Foucault tells us essentially refers to the "governmental regime" and "regime of truth". There are no specific references to the production system, to its laws of profit and to the ways in which this system intervenes in the management of the life (and bodies) of the subjects, that is, of

those who have to sell their labour force to the market in order to live,[3] except for a few, quick and superficial references to a (metaphysical) market:

> [I]t seems to me that the analysis of biopolitics can only get under way when we have understood the general regime that we can call the question of truth, of economic truth in the first place, within governmental reason. Consequently, it seems to me that it is only when we understand what is at stake in this regime of liberalism opposed to *raison d'État* – or rather, fundamentally modifying [it] without, perhaps, questioning its bases – only when we know what this governmental regime called liberalism was, we will be able to grasp what biopolitics is. (Foucault 2008, 21-2)

The same can be said of the concept of biopolitics of Agamben (2005), who, correcting Foucault, thinks that sovereignty is *tout court* biopolitics, having the sovereign the power to impose the *state of exception* and to decide on the life and death of individuals and populations. For the Italian philosopher, power is always *biopower* because it is able to inscribe its action directly in the body, that is in the *bare life*. To mention liberalism, capital or the market in the vineyard of texts – as Agamben does in several of his books – is not the same as to adopt these categories as instruments of analysis, nor to frame the bodies within a social history. The political element dominates his analysis.

Both these concepts (of *biopolitics*), despite their relative diversity, refer to a policy without the *polis* in flesh and blood (because the *polis* to which they refer is essentially devoid of roots or social articulations) and, consequently, do not allow an adequate knowledge of the tortured, thus preventing the identification of an answer to Alleg's question: "why are people being brought to use torture?". In this sense, the most adequate seems to be the biopolitics developed by Karl Marx, especially in his most important work, *Capital* (1867). Marx considers bodies inside their social history because every single body has a *social history*. According to him, so as to understand the body (and biopolitics), it is utmost to begin with the concept of *labour*:

> Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a

3 Foucault mentions, at most, the consumers of the goods, thus reducing liberalism to the sphere of circulation, eliminating production from the analytical horizon.

> form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. (Marx 1976, 283)

In the system of capitalistic production, *labour* is always the use of labour-power and *a worker* is nothing but labour-power in action:

> The use of labour-power is labour itself. The purchaser of labour-power consumes it by setting the seller of it to work. By working, the latter becomes in actuality what previously he only was potentially, namely labour-power in action, a worker. (Marx 1976, 283)

According to Marx, the difference with the past should be detected in the process of selling, for a specific period of *time*, of the workers' psycho-physical energy (i.e., labour-power) and its acquisition by the capitalist (owner of the means of production):

> He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but – a tanning. (Marx 1976, 280)

In the framework of the capitalist system, those who are obliged to sell their own labour-power for living, that have nothing to exchange at the market apart for their own psycho-physical energy, that experience absolute poverty, are confined to the sole dimension of the immediate corporeality:

> Hence every limb of the body is capital, since each of them not only has to be developed through activity, labour, but also nourished, reproduced, in order to be active as an organ. The arm, and especially the hand, are then capital. (Marx 1993, 257-8)

This corporeality is subject to manipulation of the capital and all its aspects are subordinate to trends and processes of the latter (Finelli, Toto 2012). Building on this theory of *corporeality*, Marx "presents another biopolitics" (Bidet 2012, 58) which does not exclude the role of the State, of the technicians, of the power and law from the analysis, as it completes the picture by including other elements that can shed light on the hierarchies imposed by the capital, the signs that the latter imprints on the bodies. Putting Marxian biopolitics into play – within which bodies are not simply bodies but *bodies-at-work* (Bidet 2012) – one can also construct a particular point of view on torture: it can now be observed as a social phenomenon placed with-

in the social dynamics of the market, because the bodies of the tortured – both before and after the act of torture – are objectively immersed in such dynamics.

The bodies of the tortured are not, therefore, generic bodies; they are the bodies of those placed at the bottom of the social organisation; they are the bodies of those on which the systems of production are based. In the torture chamber, of any historical and geographical dimension, we find mainly coloured people, women and workers, in other words the historically racialised social categories (Gjergji 2019).

What emerges from the ravines of history – from ancient slavery to modern capitalism – sheds light on the social and economic reasons for torture, which States make massive use of in certain historical circumstances: the greater the need for productivity and control over the workforce, the greater the use of torture. Indeed, mass torture has historically marked watershed moments or serious crisis of production systems, while, in phases of relative stability, it has served to prop them up (Gjergji 2019). The stable element in its historical and geographical horizon, i.e., the social origin of its victims, is a clear confirmation of this.

The numerous historical testimonies, as well as the most recent ones about what happened over the last decades in Latin America, Greece, Portugal, Iraq, Guantánamo, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Turkey (etc.), or the documented reports of antiracist movements – such as, for example, the *Black Lives Matter* movement – and several other associations (Schenwar, Macaré, Price 2016) are an irrefutable proof of this. In the context of international migration, torture is now a stable element (Perocco 2019). Emigrants/immigrants meet it frequently both during the migratory route and in the countries of arrival, proving that the association between torture and racism is stronger than ever.

5 Conclusions

Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body of Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), states that torture has the power to silence the tortured, to cancel their voice. The experience of violence is such that words are inadequate to describe pain, they are never up to the trauma. Stories of torture are inhabited by the impossibility of telling (Laub 1992). The only possibility that the language has to explain torture is when it is expressed within a community (De Saussure 1967). The failure in communication, indeed, is not in the lack of voice of the tortured person, but in the inability of the listener to understand. To understand, in this case, means to recognise the tortured in their entirety, without reducing them to mere bodies, with-

out history, without identity and belonging, that is to say in bodies without a *voice*. By doing so you can find an answer to Alleg's question: "why are people being brought to use torture?". The reasons for the drive to torture are structurally inscribed in social and economic systems based on hierarchies and exploitation. Torturers are generated by the objective needs of such systems, and not by generic sadism.

The scars that torture leaves on tortured people today are nothing more than the continuation, or anticipation, of the scars that the market, where they are forced to sell their workforce, has already left and will continue to leave. With the difference that the marks left by torture manifest themselves in a more intense, more ferocious version. Torturers are the horror version of those tanners of workers' own hide, about which Karl Marx speaks when he illustrates his biopolitics (Marx 1976), because the tortured belong, in the vast majority of cases, to the ranks of those who are forced to sell their skin. The "banality of evil" (Arendt 2006), or rather, *the banal truth of torture* is all here; it is already present – with varying forms and doses depending on the case – in the dynamics of the current social relationship of production. Crossed and corroded by the field of magnetic forces that social hierarchy and racist hatred create, torturers do not need great training or talent to become such. It is the molecular hierarchisation of relationships, which manifests itself on every level of existence, that socialises them to violence, even before the arrival of its professionals and bureaucrats, defined by Sartre as "dreadful workers" (Sartre 2001, 33). If it were not so, the always dense ranks of torturers, past and present, could not be explained. Torture is, *first and foremost*, the torturers' hatred of the tortured:

> [B]ehind these wild-eyed, colourless surgeons, one senses a lack of flexibility which goes beyond them and beyond their leaders themselves. We would be fortunate indeed if these crimes were the acts of a handful of violent individuals: in truth, torture creates torturers. […] In this business the individual does not count; a kind of stray anonymous hatred, a radical hatred of man, takes hold of both torturers and victims, degrading them together and each by the other. Torture is this hatred, set up as a system, and creating its own instruments. (Sartre 2001, 34)

Torture is not that unspeakable mystery that makes us question the humanity of torturers if we perceive it as the product of a particular social shaping derived from relationships/interactions based on the hierarchical principle and violence. In this sense, torture is not an *anti-social* fact, but rather a fact determined by social relations.

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