

Book review: "Detention and torture in South Africa"

Ann Harper
OASSSA
Durban

Don Foster with Dennis Davis and Diane Sandler. (1987). Detention and Torture in South Africa: Psychological, legal and historical studies Cape Town: David Philip.

"Detention and Torture in South Africa" (1987) systematically documents and analyses the personal experiences and realities of those South Africans who have suffered physical and psychological trauma consequent on their treatment during detention under Security Legislation prior to the present State of Emergency.

That this book should emerge on bookshelves at a time when far-reaching censorship and press clamps have specifically prohibited an expose of the plight of detainees and the conditions under which they are held, serves to highlight the paradoxes which bedevil this country. The latter part of the book alludes to the adamant denials, recriminations and press campaigns against the preliminary report released in September 1985 based on the empirical study which forms the core of this

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book. This evokes memories of the angst and heated confrontations which became a feature of the PASA AGM of that year when irreconcilable ideological divisions within the psychology profession emerged around issues raised by these findings.

It is recognised that the nature of the detention experience for the majority of emergency detainees, and the groups targeted for this form of harassment and oppression, has changed significantly following the massive and seemingly indiscriminate initial wave of detentions under Emergency regulations. However as anyone offering legal, psychological or medical assistance to the victims will attest, the conditions exposed in this study, the treatment meted out to those detained by the Security Forces, the physical and psychological sequelae, remain unchanged, particularly for those held for interrogation in police cells or under Internal Security legislation. In fact in many cases these are complicated and exacerbated by particular features of the present emergency situation.

Recent campaigns, international conferences and reports have focussed critical attention on detention and specifically on the plight of children caught up in the escalating violence

and relentless repression which constitutes a daily reality for the majority of South Africans. The iniquities, excesses and injustices which are committed in the name of the of the "total onslaught" and "State Security" are again receiving international attention. It is therefore timeous that Foster et al should situate present repressive practices in an historical framework which traces detention without trial in South Africa to the 1953 Public Safety Act and the "seeds of the modern system of security law" (p12) to 1927 before the National Party came to power. This highlights the fact that "despite persistent and widespread protest... (it) could be argued that provisions for detention have become broader in scope and more draconian in effect over the passing years". (p1) The opening chapters focus on historical and legal considerations and not only trace the development of these laws, but provide a significant and revealing analysis of those "social and historical processes within which (these) legal devices are embedded" (p11) and the role that security legislation has played in buttressing an unjust social order.

The book goes on to give a survey of the psychological and psychiatric literature and international research pertaining to sensory deprivation, psychological sequelae of concentration camp experiences, torture research and the

book. This work makes use of the simple and tested learned helplessness theory. This provides a basis and theoretical framework for an understanding of the process of detention under South African Security Laws prior to the present State of Emergency and the associated physical and psychological effects which become the focus of the empirical investigation reported in detail in chapters 5 and 6.

Although it is acknowledged that researchers who attempt to understand the psychological outcome of detention and torture are not in complete agreement (pp160-162), from the point of view of psychological theory and empirical research (not to mention conference presentations) it is often tempting and convenient to cluster these psychological signs and symptoms under the diagnostic rubric of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. The inherent danger for practice is that it might be as easy for counsellors of ex-detainees to move from diagnosis to a focus on individual pathology thereby not taking significant cognisance of the continuing stress generated by the material, social and political conditions of apartheid South Africa which confront ex-detainees on their release.

Since 1985 in particular, these include amongst others, likely unemployment and extreme financial hardship, exclusion from the school system, disruption and possible non-existence of

the decline by former detainees of psychological family, community and organisational supports, and an on-going threat to personal safety be it from Security Forces or the chaotic violence such as that found in townships around Pietermaritzburg.

It would seem that Security Forces at present are not placing the same reliance on detentions as a means of discouraging support for popular organisation with the focus moving to a build up of kitskonstables, municipal police and vigilante groups (cf Descom Bulletin, No 15, Dec 1987). However the need to put detention on the agenda of those community and worker organisations which have been specifically targetted remains a priority. In this regard, the conclusion by Foster et al that,

"A common feature of all the psychological literature surveyed in chapter 4 from sensory deprivation through concentration camps and torture research to learned helplessness theory, was the notion that effects of stressors was mediated and exacerbated by variables that have been labelled as ambiguity, unexpectedness, lack of preparation or unpredictability" (p164)

is significant, if organisations are to formulate a coherent and systematic response to members who run the risk of being detained as well as those who have been released.

Detention and torture have been a focus of concern and protest in South Africa for many years and various articles and reports have emerged based on the extensive information gleaned from court records, inquests, personal testimony and investigations initiated by church groupings and organisations such as DESCOM/DPSC and NAMDA. The pioneering work of Foster, Davis and Sandler represents however, the first national large-scale indepth empirical study of the realities identified by these reports. As they say in their study,

"The intention of this study is to examine in detail the events conditions, and psychological processes associated with detention practices in South Africa" (p86)

This was achieved by a countrywide investigation by means of 158 personal interviews representing 176 incidences of detention focussing on

"claims from former detainees regarding conditions, events, and actions prior to and during detention, as well

as....claims by former detainees of psychological processes associated with detention practices in South Africa" (p86)

The sample breakdown highlights aspects such as gender, "race", age, religion, area of political work at the time of detention, educational level, geographical distribution and type of detention.

"Within the process of detention itself, results are further presented for physical conditions of detention, interrogation patterns, personal contact with both authorities and non-authorities as well as claimed physical and psychological torture. Health problems are examined in terms of symptoms experienced during detention as well as upon release" (p92)

The importance of the descriptions obtained in this study cannot be underestimated and represent clear proof of the severity of detention conditions in South Africa and unequivocal evidence that these constitute a grave risk to physical health and psychological well-being. The contention that detainees in South Africa are frequently and fairly systematically subjected to torture can no longer be dismissed

out of hand as fabrication and ANC inspired propaganda and conspiracy.

The questions not addressed by the Rabie Commission set up after the death of Steve Biko to investigate allegations that the security system does not provide safeguards to prevent physical and psychological torture of detainees, are answered with analytical thoroughness and academic care. While the Commission placed "undue reliance on the evidence of the security police without examining the other side of the cases" (Dugard, in Foster et al, p3) and omitted to investigate methods of interrogation, Chapter 6 gives detainees a voice and descriptions of their experiences provide rich qualitative data which "convey the feelings, thoughts, reactions, interactions and hopes and fears of persons in this situation" (p 119)

For those using this book as a resource for their work with ex-detainees or those who risk detention, it is as well to heed the warning by Foster et al that group-based variations such as those which "show that in general women and African respondents reported higher symptom frequencies" (p162) still leave the question of individual differences unanswered. "This is a complex issue....since coping strategies may vary with

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Book review: "Not either an experimental doll"

different stages of the detention process." (p163) It is also acknowledged that a wide range of factors may influence the relationship between events during detention and possible sequelae. These include duration held, specific nature of treatment including severity of interrogation and experiences of solitary confinement etc. This issue is presented in a tentative exploratory manner with the intention of identifying themes and possible avenues for further research.

Chapter 7 concludes with a wide range of recommendations directed at the State legislators, the courts of law and professional bodies representing law, medicine, psychology, education and religion. The present emergency regulations give extensive powers of arrest and detention to all members of the security forces while virtually indemnifying them against prosecution arising from these acts, and place a total clamp on the publication of information relating to detentions and detainees. These recommendations should be seen in the context of,

"The extent of the present repression and the scale of detentions (which) make it all the more important for the court to restrict executive power." (p193).

and all the less likely that they will be able to do so. The virtual banning of DESCOM and DPSC on 24 February 1988 only increases this sense of despondency. For as Foster et al conclude

".....justice is hardly to be expected in a fundamentally unjust society. It is recognised that the origin of torture (and detention) in South Africa is located in the procedures and institutions designed to maintain the oppressive and exploitative social order. Until these injustices are removed, until the oppressive social order is changed, grave fears are expressed about future protection against torture in South Africa." (p 180)

Reference

Durban Descom (1987) Descom Bulletin Number 15