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Legacies of Authoritarianism Brazilian Torturers' and Murderers' Reformulation of Memory

by
Martha K. Huggins

In countries undergoing redemocratization, as throughout Latin America, where torture and murder were systematic government practices, remembering and forgetting have a political as well as a personal dimension. How an authoritarian past is reconstructed by those who experienced it can influence whether past torturers and murderers receive blanket amnesty or submit to a trial with possible civil and criminal punishment or the scrutiny of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission or some other public acknowledgment of their acts. Each course of action shapes personal and political healing among participants in a particular way. Amnesty for those in violent security forces may demoralize their victims while providing a "political bargain" that promotes overall political stabilization, at least for a while. Political trials may foster victims' healing but undermine the perpetrators' political transformation and public acknowledgment of their wrongdoing: seeing trials as threatening, perpetrators may reject self-criticism and go more deeply underground to avoid their and their families' becoming "victims." This outcome may have an impact on social memory by keeping information about the character of repressive regimes from becoming public history. This in turn may hinder political transformation, since, as Walter Benjamin (1968) has argued, what becomes collective memory can promote or inhibit collective resistance to oppression and political transformation toward democracy.

How does a country remember its violent past? This study attempts to reconstruct Brazilian historical memory of the military regime's security forces through interviews with police about the torture and murder they

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committed or systematically observed. It proposes that one way of understanding what interviews say about police violence is to see police discourse as an attempt to make their past behavior—legitimated at the time by Brazil's war against internal subversion—compatible with postauthoritarian ideological, legal, and organizational realities. Seen in this way, interviewees' moralizing about violence is an answer to outsiders' (in this case, foreign interviewers') questions—asked during Brazil's redemocratization period—about behavior that occurred under the military dictatorship. An interviewee's account is a negotiated synthesis of admitted past violence, the social and political situation that supported it, and the sociolegal context within which such an account is likely to be judged. The account is a statement about the cultural and political justifications for security force violence in the present, for, as Collins (1998: 11) has argued, "how one stories the past is . . . directly related to how one imagines politics in the present."

In summarizing former Brazilian torturers' and murderers' stories about their own and others' past violence, it has been discovered that these can be grouped usefully into four categories of discourse; the interviewees either diffused responsibility, blamed individuals (themselves or others), cited a "just cause," or justified violence as part of a worthy "professionalism." These attributions may be recombined into four "vocabularies of motive" (Mills, 1940) that either justify, excuse, deny, or confess to torture and/or murder. A subtle system of moral reckoning underpins these vocabularies; it sees some torture as acceptable, some as unacceptable but understandable, and some as unacceptable. It is argued that interviewees' tendency to justify "acceptable" police violence as rooted in professionalism represents a shift from the military period, when torture was excused primarily in terms of the "just cause" of "national security." This suggests that interviewees have maneuvered themselves into a culturally more acceptable postdictatorship moral identity by recasting stories about violence in a vocabulary they believe has more salience for democracy.

BRAZIL'S DICTATORSHIP

In 1964, the Brazilian military, backed by the United States (see Black, 1977; Parker, 1979), overthrew President João Goulart, ushering in 21 years of military rule. The military consolidated its power over state and society over a number of years through executive decrees (17 institutional acts), a national security law, and laws 317 and 667, placing all police forces under military control. The subsequent creation of combined police and military

intelligence and operations organizations pulled specialized police units into a nationwide, centrally orchestrated war against “internal subversion” (Huggins, 1998b).

While the Brazilian military’s “dirty war” against “subversives” did not torture and kill proportionately as many people as in the military-dominated countries of the Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay) or Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras), Brazil’s national security state (1964-1985) carried out widespread repression that included brutality, torture, murder, and “disappearances.” Just “between 1969 and 1974 . . . institutional violence [was so much a] . . . part of everyday life [in Brazil that] it was difficult to meet a Brazilian who had not come into direct or indirect contact with a torture victim or been a search-and-arrest operation target” (Alves, 1985: 125; see also Archdiocese, 1986; Huggins, 1998b).

Many scholars treat such violence as exclusive to the military, but in Brazil this underestimates the role of the police in the military government’s national security state. In fact, Brazilian military officers have argued that until the early 1970s the military was less well equipped to fight internal subversion (Fon, 1979) than Brazil’s state-based Departamento de Ordem Política e Social (Civil Social and Political Police—DOPS), whose years of experience had prepared it to carry out political repression (Lago and Lagoa, 1979; Guaracy Mingardi, interview, São Paulo, September 1995). This being the case, any examination of security force violence during Brazil’s military period must not neglect the police.

Before the military regime, Brazil’s local, municipal, and state police systems had each been independent of one another and of federal control. The uniformed State Militarized Police (Policía Militar), which carries out first-response policing, has historically been under each state’s elected governor (Fernandes, 1979). The Militarized Police, with various divisions, including foot patrols, cavalry, motorized squads, intelligence units (P-2), and riot control and SWAT teams, until 1969 carried a different name in each state—“Força Publica” in São Paulo and “Brigada Militar” in Goiás, for example.

The nonuniformed (“judicial” or detective) Civil Police (Policía Civil), which conducts post facto investigations of lawbreaking, has historically been under each state’s secretary of public security. Civil Police divisions have traditionally included the DOPS, a criminal investigations division (e.g., São Paulo’s Departamento de Investigação Criminal—DEIC), motorized flying squads, and property crimes and homicide divisions.

In 1969, when Brazil’s Civil and Militarized Police were placed under the armed forces, each state’s militarized police was renamed Military Police (Policía Militar).¹ At about the same time, Brazil’s military government

began creating new intelligence and operations agencies made up of Civil Police, Militarized Police, and the military itself—Rio de Janeiro’s Grupo de Operações Especiais (Special Operations Group—GOE), São Paulo’s Operação Bandeirantes (Operation Bandeirantes—OBAN), and Rio Grande do Sul’s Diretoria Central de Informações (Central Information Directorate—DCI). In 1970, the military established a new hybrid national-level police-and-military organization called the Destacamento de Operações/Centro de Operações de Defesa Interna (Internal Defense and Operations Directorate—DOI/CODI) with jurisdiction throughout Brazil’s newly created multistate “national security zones.” Each zone had a CODI branch (the intelligence-gathering-and-analysis and planning section) and at least one DOI operations squad.² The latter was subdivided into units for hunt-and-capture, interrogation, information, and elimination (*Isto É*, 1978: 32; Interview G, 8/93; Huggins, 1998b). By all accounts, DOI/CODI was the most violent of Brazil’s internal security agencies (see Archdiocese, 1986). Ironically, *doi* is Portuguese for “to feel pain.”

SECURING A SAMPLE

For the sample, we³ sought police who had served during Brazil’s military period and who had tortured and/or murdered, but this was difficult. In the first place, although Brazil had granted amnesty to known official (e.g., military and police) torturers and killers, most such internal security personnel had not used the amnesty process. This meant that most torturers and murderers could not be identified by confession or other self-revelation. Even amnestied former agents of Brazil’s national security state had no reason to grant an interview; besides wanting to put this part of their lives behind them, they feared that human rights groups might publicize their admitted past misdeeds, making life difficult for them and their families. In addition, many former torturers and killers did not fully trust Brazil’s amnesty guarantee, suspecting that some new government might take action to hold them responsible for past deeds. For example, the statute of limitations on murder is 20 years; many had committed murder only 10 or 15 years earlier.

Given the difficulties in locating known torturers and killers among Brazil’s active and retired police from the military period, we designed a method for indirectly finding such persons. We sought interviews in particular with members of units known to have been involved in heavy violence, including torture and murder, during the military period—the DOPS, the Civil Police criminal investigations units (e.g., the DEIC in São Paulo), and the homicide and property crimes divisions. We wanted to interview Civil and Militarized

Police from motorized patrols and SWAT and riot teams and from the Militarized Police intelligence division (P-2). Most sought after were police from the special operations and intelligence squads that combined the Civil Police, the Militarized Police, and the military (GOE, OBAN, DOI/CODI). We reasoned that someone who had been in one of these internal security agencies would have either committed violence against suspects or been present when such violence had taken place—in other words, would at least have been a silent participant in or witness to brutality, torture, and/or murder. As Robert Jay Lifton (1986: 425) argues, such organizations are “atrocious-producing situation[s] . . . so structured . . . institutionally that the average person entering . . . will commit or become associated with atrocities.”

We also sought police interviewees from regions that had experienced the greatest political repression, in particular, from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Pôrto Alegre, Recife, and Brasília.

Finally, on the assumption that police who had been incarcerated for committing crimes might talk more openly about aspects of police life usually kept secret, we sought interviews at a special Rio de Janeiro prison for convicted Militarized and Civil Police.

Within our sampling parameters, we secured 27 interviewees through a nonrandom “snowball” sampling technique. In each target city, the “snowball” began with the first interview, which was usually obtained through the Brazilianist researcher’s prior contacts with local police or by referral from an interviewee elsewhere. Once the interviewer had secured one interviewee who met the sampling parameters, that person was asked to suggest a colleague. This gave the interviewer an introduction to other policemen who might agree to be interviewed despite their guarding deep personal and institutional secrets.

The way the study was presented to prospective interviewees undoubtedly influenced whether we secured an interview. We told interviewees that we were conducting a comparative study about being policemen in times of conflict and crisis, explaining that we intended to examine the lives, careers, and work of Brazilian police during that country’s military period. This was, in fact, correct, since our study required information about interviewees’ training experiences, daily work, personal lives, and career changes. Only after rapport had been established, usually some two hours into the interview, did the interviewer ask about involvement in brutality, torture, and/or murder.

Each interview took at least three hours of face-to-face interaction. In two cases the interviewee agreed to a second interview, which also ran about three hours. I conducted interviews in Brazilian Portuguese and tape-recorded them. Then an American anthropological linguist and professional translator transcribed the tapes and translated them into English, and I checked the

translations. For each interviewee this yielded between 30 and 40 pages of text. Of the 27 police interviews, 23 had been translated at the time of this analysis, and 14 of these gave clear evidence of the interviewees having tortured and/or murdered.⁴ The 14-person subsample includes 9 members of the Civil Police—among them 1 from DOPS, 1 a former prison warden, and 2 from special police squads. Of the 5 members of the Militarized Police in the subsample, 1 had been in DOI/CODI, 2 in a death squad, and 1 in Militarized Police Intelligence (P-2).

INDICATORS FOR TORTURERS

Even though the sampling process was structured to ensure a high probability of securing former torturers and murderers, there was no certainty of success until our transcribed interview narratives had been examined. Given the reluctance of some interviewees to talk directly about police torture and murder, we developed alternative indicators of their involvement.

The first indicator of torture and killing was whether the policeman's name appeared on a Brazilian human rights group's list of known torturers. An individual's name might be on such a list because he had been a defendant in an internal military trial (see Archdiocese, 1986) or because he had been identified publicly by former victims or their families. Only 3 of the 14 interviewees examined here were on such lists. However, these lists cover only a portion of all torturers and murderers from Brazil's military period.

A second indicator was a statement by an associate of the interviewee that he had participated in torture and/or murder. This usually took the form of one interviewee's stating that his friend—another of the interviewees—had been involved in "political repression"—code in Brazil for having participated in violence, including torture and murder. Seven of 14 interviewees were identified in this way, including 2 of those already identified as torturers by human rights groups.

A third indicator involved a network analysis of each interviewee's personal and working relationships with denounced torturers, murderers, and/or murder organizations (see Figure 1). The rationale for linking an interviewee to a denounced torturer or murderer or to a murder organization, in descending order of association, was (1) the interviewee's claim to have worked as a peer, superior, or subordinate to such a person or organization, (2) his calling a known torturer or murderer a "friend," and/or (3) his expressing respect for such a person as a police agent. These three indicators usually overlapped. Eleven of the 14 interviewees had close involvement with torturers and/or killers and/or with a violent organization.

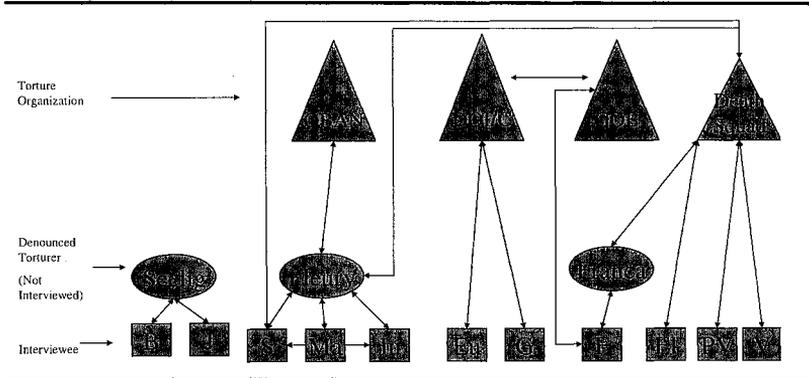


Figure 1: Network Analysis

Note: OBAN = Operação Bandeirantes (Operation Bandeirantes), DOI/C = Destacamento de Operações/Centro de Operações de Defesa Interna (Internal Defense and Operations Directorate), and GOB = government of Brazil.

A final indicator of involvement in torture and/or murder was the admission of the interviewee himself. Eight of the 14 subjects admitted to having tortured, 7 said that they had killed, 7 said that they had commanded a group that had tortured and/or killed, 4 admitted having been in a group that tortured and/or killed, 6 reported that they had been present when torture had taken place, and 9 said that they had used “excess” violence in performance of their duty.

THE DISCOURSE OF THE VIOLENT

Having established that 14 interviewees appeared to have participated in torture and/or murder, we examined how their involvement was reflected in their discourse about violence, without necessarily expecting them to admit to having participated in either torture or murder. A content analysis of the interview narratives revealed that the explanations for having committed such violence fell into one of four categories: diffusing responsibility, blaming individuals (victims or perpetrators), citing a just cause, and identifying professional imperatives and pressures (see Table 1).

DIFFUSING RESPONSIBILITIES

A first set of explanations for torture and/or murder assigned responsibility to others or to some broad sociocultural context or to no one. Eight of 14

TABLE 1
Torturers' Explanations

<i>Case</i>	<i>Explanation Types</i>				
	<i>Diffusion</i>	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Just</i>		
	<i>(Denial)</i>	<i>(Excuse)</i>	<i>(Confession)</i>	<i>Cause</i>	<i>Professionalism</i>
			<i>(Justifications)</i>		
J	1	3	0	0	1
El	2	1	0	0	2
K	2	1	0	0	2
S	2	3	0	1	3
PV	3	2	0	1	3
Ma	0	2	0	0	3
Eu	0	2	0	1	3
B	0	1	0	0	2
JB	0	1	0	1	2
G	1	0	1	0	3
F	1	0	0	3	1
A	0	0	0	1	1
V	1	1	0	0	1
JU	0	0	0	0	1
Number of each type	13	17	1	8	28
Number of cases	8/14	10/14	1/14	6/14	14/14

interviewees presented such arguments. None of them denied that violence had occurred at least in their presence.

Some placed the roots of torture and/or murder in the behavior of colleagues or members of police units other than their own, even though in most cases they had been present when violence was taking place.

It was shocking . . . the first time to see someone hanging on the "parrot's perch" with a water hose in his mouth. I didn't agree with that, but I was inside the room and the guys were [torturing him]. (Interview J, Brasília, September 1993)

Some interviewees pointed to specific or general sociocultural situations that had led some police to torture and/or murder:

Living in an aggressive environment affects you, contaminates you little by little, without you feeling it. (Interview El, Rio, August 1993)

Brazil is a Catholic country. In Brazil they are used to this kind of behavior, like torture, for example, because Catholic churches tortured people for years and years, centuries and centuries. (Interview J, Brasília, September 1993)

Some interviewees diffused responsibility by citing no clear source of responsibility for torture and/or murder:

The first time I traded shots with someone . . . was like when you fall asleep at the wheel of the car. You're there and it frightens you so much that it scares the sleep away for minutes. (Interview K, Brasília, October 1993)

Some guys died, but I don't know who killed them. There were many guys shooting . . . I don't know who hit the guy and who [didn't]. You just know that people died. Fortunately it was the other side. (Interview J, Brasília, September 1993)

BLAMING INDIVIDUALS

Ten of the 14 interviewees located the roots of torture and/or murder in "bad" victims or perpetrators. Some felt that the victims had brought such violence on themselves by failing to cooperate or through their "stupidity" or antisocial behavior:

They were tortured because they were stupid. . . . [We said,] "you had the opportunity to talk without being tortured, but you preferred not to talk." If she confessed, she would remain a prisoner but without any torture. (Interview J, Brasília, September 1993)

[Torture] is used on thieves and assailants because they're men . . . with crocodile tears, and sometimes the evidence is so obvious and they deny things so cynically that if a policeman working with him doesn't have a certain balance, he'll slap him around a little [i.e., torture him]: "Oh, you mean you want to make a fool out of me! We're going to spin him [on the parrot's perch torture rod]." (Interview K, Brasília, October 1993)

An explanation that blamed the perpetrators for torturing and/or murdering saw such violence as carried out by policemen either permanently bad (almost always someone other than the interviewee) or temporarily out of control (sometimes implicitly including the interviewee). One explanation that blamed but partially exonerated the perpetrator was that temporarily bad policemen had been driven by situational emotions and bad judgment. In this case, torture and/or murder had grown out of "stupidity," youth, lack of professional preparation—for example, insufficient training—or temporarily blinding passion:

That trafficker who caused my arrest . . . I was going to kill him. [He] had robbed my home. I decided to kill him. . . . I was blinded by my hatred. (Interview El, Rio, August 1993)

[The torturers] were a bunch of guys doing stupid things . . . young guys who didn't know what they were doing. . . . Most of these guys were not well prepared; they [just] wanted to show off. (Interview J, Brasília, September 1993)

In contrast, the “permanently bad” police either derived illicit pleasure from violence or were given to excess drinking or drug use or were overly aggressive and “dangerous” because of a “character disorder” or just inherently dishonest. But in most cases such police—who, for example, murdered “for the simple joy of killing” (Interview PV, Rio, August 1993) or tortured because they were basically “very cruel” (Interview J, Brasília, September 1993)—were portrayed as exceptions rather than the rule:

There [were] certain men in the police, on my team—I knew one—who got pleasure out of killing [a crook]. It wasn't in self-defense and we couldn't even say, “Let's get rid of this guy [the captive], he's bad.” No, he really wanted to kill—when one or two bullets was enough to kill someone, he'd wind up taking five rounds—pow, pow, pow. . . . [He'd] kill people as coldly as you'd kill a chicken. (Interview S, São Paulo, August 1993)

The [bad] torturer wants to torture to find out about evidence and extort . . . other people. He catches a thief, beats . . . him so the thief will tell him who he sold his things to. He'll . . . go to those people . . . and take money from [them to keep quiet]. (Interview Ma, São Paulo, August 1993)

A more subtle argument in this category was that police who became torturers and murderers were initially more aggressive and/or “cold” than other colleagues—a quality not seen by interviewees as necessarily bad:

People who are more identified with . . . [torture and murder are] very cold by nature . . . very aggressive. . . . [These qualities are] noticed . . . [by superiors]. . . . Certain people who have that quality for working in a certain [violent] fashion really are exploited by their bosses, by those who want to get the job over with quickly. (Interview JB, Brasília, September 1993)

JUST CAUSE

A third set of arguments cited a just cause for torture and/or murder. These asserted that police who committed such violence were responding to a generalized declared war, state of siege, internal war, war on drugs, war on crime, or threat to life of a specific “good citizen.” Six of 14 interviewees advanced one or another such explanation:

If I arrest someone who has kidnapped a little girl who might be killed in four hours, I'm not going to waste time by questioning him for two or three days just to wear him down. So . . . I'll hang that guy up [on the parrot's perch], work him over, and he'll tell me in five minutes. (Interview S, São Paulo, August 1993)

We worked as if at war. We were patriots, we were defending our country, we were proud of that, so they were adversaries, the enemy. We were proud of what we did . . . working in DOPS . . . that pride of ridding the country of a threat, of a communist regime. . . . [We were] people doing a patriotic job, a big job, an important job. . . . We were a religious people, a Christian people. (Interview Eu, Brasília, September 1993)

PROFESSIONALISM

The fourth category of explanation, citing professional mandates and pressures as the causes of torture and/or murder, was given by all interviewees, and two-thirds advanced at least two such arguments. A fundamental assumption of these accounts was that torture and/or murder were sometimes necessary and acceptable and those who engaged in them were morally neither good nor bad—just professionally attuned to their organization's policies and practices to a greater or lesser extent:

[Such police] aren't unbalanced . . . they show good conduct in the police, they reach retirement, and don't have disciplinary problems. [That they torture] doesn't mean that they're monsters. (Interview Eu, Brasília, September 1993)

In fact, many interviewees made the underlying assumption that professionalism mediated police conduct, including helping to indicate the proper use of violence. As one Militarized Police official explained,

When the man doesn't feel like a professional he's vulnerable to corruption, to deserting his post . . . to getting killed . . . to putting others at risk. During the first gun battle, he'll take off shooting and . . . kill someone who doesn't have anything to do with anything. (Interview F, Rio, August 1993)

According to this argument, violence is "normal" (i.e., natural and acceptable) if carried out in the "proper" circumstances by police professionals who know when and how to use it. Whether violence is acceptable derives under professionalism from a "rational" calculus:

You can't [just] react, to kill [properly]; you have to act with reason. Police work is being intelligent, it's reasoning, technique, information. . . . You only kill when there's no other way, when either you kill or someone else dies.

Beyond that, you don't kill, in my opinion. . . . You can't react [by] kill[ing]; you have to act with reason. (Interview El, Rio, August 1993)

[The death squad I headed did not] kill innocent people; [it] waited for statistics . . . look[ed] for facts, so we kn[ew] who was and who wasn't [a criminal]. You see who is a worker, who is a student; you see who is a good person, who's a bandit; you get to know everything. You zero in on the right person. (Interview PV, Rio, August 1993)

Professionalism discourse sees acceptable police violence as a balance between rational calculation and possibly disruptive organizational pressures and imperatives. As one Civil Police official explained, pointing to the organizational roots of police violence,

Torture is zealotry in trying to discover, unravel a crime. [The police] handle a lot of work. We don't have the resources to work on an investigation . . . [so] the shortest route is by torturing. (Interview Eu, Brasília, September 1993)

Several interviewees pointed out that police who had correctly followed higher officials' orders were later denounced by their superiors for the violence they had "professionally" carried out. In the process, they had become "victims of their profession":

Many [police] I know feel frustrated because they believed at th[e] time . . . they were doing a relevant job [that those in the government wanted done] and benefited from. And now he's thrown into the background. He then feels highly frustrated. (Interview JB, Brasília, September 1993)

[Police] get involved in a struggle for society and are condemned for it. If they commit excesses—go beyond the line of duty—it's because they want to be good policemen. (Interview S, São Paulo, August 1993)

EMBODYING AND DISEMBODYING VIOLENCE

The four accounts implicitly represent different ways of incorporating body and mind into discourse about violence. The first three explanations—diffusion of responsibility, blaming individuals, and just cause—most commonly include references to a victim's body and/or to someone or something that explicitly acts on a victim's body. These explanations "embody" violence by specifically linking it to human physicality. In contrast, professionalism discourse "disembodies" violence by substituting nonhuman

organizational actors for human agency and physicality and by justifying violence through a dispassionate calculus.

But besides the presence or absence of physicality in interviewees' discourse, another pattern in the data involves interviewees' framing discourse to make their past violence compatible with Brazil's postdictatorship ideal human rights climate. A conceptual framework developed by Stokes and Hewitt describes such "aligning actions" as a conceptual process that brings discordant behavior into accord with idealized cultural expectations (Scully and Marolla, 1984: 264). In a study of convicted rapists, Scully and Marolla found that interviewees reconstructed their deviance using a culturally available "vocabulary of motives" (Mills, 1940) that anticipated negative evaluations of past behavior and offered culturally acceptable accounts for it. For example, some convicted rapists negotiated "a [new] moral identity for themselves by presenting [their] rape as [having been] idiosyncratic rather than typical behavior"—for example, arguing that the rape was beyond their control. Other convicted rapists brought past deviance into line with cultural expectations by describing their violence as "controversial"—their behavior, although not quite correct, was appropriate for the situation: a "bad" woman had gotten what she deserved (Scully and Marolla, 1984: 274-275). In both cases, common patriarchal cultural stereotypes about women gave rapists the vocabulary for post facto discourse about rape. They aligned past behavior with a current moral climate.

In an attempt to systematize the various vocabularies of motive that align past with present, Scott and Lyman (1968: 61) categorize accounts about norm-breaking as "excuses" and "justifications." When accounts—discourse that is "standardized within cultures . . . [and] routinely expected"—take the form of excuses there is an assumption that "an act . . . [is] bad, wrong, or inappropriate [with a denial of] full responsibility" for it. "Excuses" recount deviance as having been an accident or as having resulted from a special state of mind, from uncontrollable biological drives, or from the victim's "badness." Accounts that take the rhetorical form of justifications recognize the impermissibility of the deviant behavior "but claim . . . [that a] particular occasion permit[ted] or require[d it]" (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 51). Most commonly, justifications neutralize deviance (Sykes and Matza, 1957) by either denying any injury and/or violence to victims or condemning the condemners or appealing to a higher loyalty. Cohen (1993: 107) argues that such neutralizations come "into play when you acknowledge (admit) that something happened but either refuse to accept the category of acts to which it is assigned ('crime' or 'massacre') or present it as morally justified."⁵

TABLE 2
Accounting for Police Violence

<i>Admitting Act Is Wrong</i>	<i>Accepting Personal Responsibility for Act</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Yes	Confession (1)	Excuse (9)
No	Justification: professionalism (14), just cause (6)	Denial (7)

Source: Adapted from Scott and Lyman (1968).

Note: Table totals exceed total number of cases because cases fall into multiple categories.

Neither Scott and Lyman's (1968) nor Scully and Marolla's (1984) typology by itself covers the range of discursive patterns in our interview data. Besides justifying or excusing their violence, the interviewees also either confessed to it or denied it. Taking these two additional categories into account, a four-celled taxonomy (see Table 2) was created to capture interviewees' various vocabularies of motive. Using this "accounting for violence" taxonomy to recode our interview data, we found that all interviewees gave one or another account that justified police violence—denying the pejorative character of torture and/or murder while accepting responsibility for it. Of the two most common justifications, just-cause explanations were only half as frequent as professionalism arguments. The next most frequent accounts excused violence by recognizing that the torture and/or murder had been wrong while denying personal responsibility for them, usually by blaming victims, perpetrators, or perpetrators' superiors. Even less common were denials; these diffused responsibility for violence and rejected both the deviant nature of torture and/or murder and the perpetrator's personal responsibility for having carried out this violence. Finally, confession was rare.

Only one interviewee (G, Rio, August 1993) fully and openly confessed to his role in violence by admitting having systematically murdered for the state, and he qualified his confession by claiming that his violence was preferable to that committed by colleagues: he had murdered rather than tortured his victims. In a description of one of his murder team's "death flights" (see also Verbitsky, 1996) to Brazil's Amazon region, G explained that the group's objective was to return from the murder mission "with no one [of the prisoners] on board." On the return flight, prisoners were subjected to "all kinds of torture . . . women [were being] raped . . . and [then] thrown out of the helicopter [alive]." G felt so "badly" at seeing his colleagues torture and rape a female prisoner that he "had to kill [her]," explaining that while his

TABLE 3
Torturers' Moral Reckoning about Others' Reasons for Torturing

<i>Acceptable</i>	<i>Not Wholly Acceptable but Understandable</i>	<i>Unacceptable</i>
Perpetrator is professionally trained and controlled	Perpetrator is youthful, stupid, ignorant; lacks training; temporarily out of control	Perpetrator is deliberately sadistic, cruel, cold-bloodedly vicious
Perpetrator uses coercive psychological cunning and intelligence	Perpetrator is cold, aggressive, and purposely used by superiors; under "bad" orders	Perpetrator is irrational, permanently out of control (character disorder), or has judgment impaired by drugs or alcohol
For a "just cause," to get needed information where only violence will succeed or victim does not cooperate	In brutalizing social conditions or where perpetrator is actively present but not participating in violence	For personal satisfaction and/or economic gain

colleagues had thrown their victims out of the helicopter alive, he had "at least" killed his victim before shoving her body out of the helicopter.

"ACCEPTABLE" AND "UNACCEPTABLE" POLICE VIOLENCE

The morality scale implicit in this interviewee's confession points to evaluative distinctions made by all interviewees about the relative permissibility of torture and/or murder. Interviewees assigned such violence to one of three moral categories—acceptable, not wholly acceptable but understandable, or unacceptable—depending on its situational context (see Table 3). By situating past violence within a reconstructed social context that took current moralities into account, the interviewee could align his past actions in a way that negotiated a seemingly more socially acceptable moral identity.

While not all interviewees included all three categories of moral judgment in their discourse about violence, their discourses had several features in common: (1) they had a clear notion of when such violence was acceptable and when it was not, (2) they had remarkably similar criteria for assigning past violence to one or another moral category, and (3) each interviewee's moral calculus was sufficiently flexible to see violence as acceptable in one situation, understandable in another, and unacceptable in a

third, although only nuances in Portuguese separated these moral classifications from each other.

One interesting foundation for most interviewees' moral calculus was that torture had to be kept operationally distinct from murder: torturers who did their jobs properly should not kill, and killers should not dirty themselves with torture. Incorporating this reasoning into his explanation, G stated, "It was much easier to kill, because [by contrast] the torturer had to have a commitment to his victim" if he hoped to get what was needed. With murder, in contrast, "there was no commitment" to victims: they were killed before any relationship could develop to compromise the professional killer carrying out his task (Interview G, Rio, August 1993). This tendency to separate torture from murder led us to focus this part of the analysis exclusively on assertions about torture.

MORAL RECKONING BY TORTURERS

"Good" police torturers were described by accounts that justified their violence. Trained and "rational" police who had tortured acceptably had a clear knowledge of their limits and/or were under direction of a "rational" superior. Under such circumstances, torture was legitimate for pursuing a just cause and for professionally interrogating "bad" suspects (see Table 3). "Good" torturers' violence was "disembodied," rooted in the political or guided by a rational "mind."

"Bad" police torturers had used violence for pleasure—they were deliberately sadistic, permanently lacked self-control, or had tortured under the temporary influence of drugs or alcohol and/or for dishonest economic ends. Such "unacceptable" torture was "embodied" as biologically driven, resulting from "irrational" human physicality.

Torturers in the moral middle ground—where torture was "not wholly acceptable but understandable"—were described by a mixed discourse: torture could result from a temporary loss of emotional control or selection by "the system" of an overly aggressive policeman to carry out its violence. Here torturers were frequently embodied as victimized, physically driven "perpetrators." Such unacceptable torture was usually excused as morally wrong, with the stipulation that these torturers were not fully responsible for their deviant behavior: biological or social pressures had led them to behave improperly.

CHANGING ACCOUNTS: EXPLAINING THE PAST THROUGH THE PRESENT

Since Brazil's official democracy now formally condemns torture—even though it is still regularly practiced against the poor—current accounts can be expected to explain the past through a vocabulary of motives that neutralizes interviewees' past violence. Moreover, if, as Cohen (1993: 107) argues, motivational accounts are “drawn upon in advance from the cultural pool of . . . vocabularies [currently] available to actors and observers,” then the accounts that “legitimately” motivated, justified, and excused torture and/or murder during Brazil's military period will not be as socially and politically acceptable today as in the past. Motivational accounts will change to embrace shifting cultural, social, and political realities.

Discussing the relationship of discursive content to societal conditions and change, Foucault (1979; see also Sheridan, 1980) suggests that to be taken seriously, motivational accounts must today be grounded in a contemporary “‘will to truth’ that [has] . . . its bases in a corpus of scientifically grounded writing that includes the rules, techniques, and instruments for establishing ‘truth.’” In fact, throughout much of the industrialized world, “believable” accounts are now couched in scientific, rational, pragmatic, organizationally instrumentalist terms. To put it another way, C. Wright Mills (1940: 910) wrote that “in a society in which religious motives have been debunked on a rather wide scale, certain thinkers are skeptical of those who ubiquitously proclaim them.” In other words, with a shift from the ideological hegemony of religion and the sacred to the supremacy of science and secularism, explanations that rely on the former will not have the credibility of those based on the latter. Recognizing that the users of language incorporate such cultural expectations into their discourse, Cohen (1993: 108) points out that built into an individual's accounts “is the knowledge that certain ones will be [more readily] accepted [and] will be honored by the legal system and the wider public.”

FROM NATIONAL SECURITY TO PROFESSIONALISM

Much research on Brazil's military period (Black, 1977; Langguth, 1978; Lernoux, 1980; Pinheiro, 1991; Huggins, 1998b) demonstrates that cold war notions of national security were commonly invoked to justify state repression. Security forces divided Brazil's population into “subversives” and “good citizens,” with security forces in an all-out “just war” against “sub-

version" (Black, 1977; Alves, 1985; Lernoux, 1980; Weschler, 1987; Skidmore, 1988; Huggins, 1998b). Calling on a "just war" argument, President General Ernesto Geisel (1974-1979) explained in the early 1990s—to justify his government's involvement in torture—that "there are circumstances in which a person is forced to engage in [torture] for obtaining confessions and, thus, to avoid a greater harm [to society]" (Fundação Getúlio Vargas [FGV], 1997).⁶ In this case, the general's postdictatorship "just war" discourse about torture is congruent with what would have been an "acceptable" justification during Brazil's military period.

Having expected our interviewees to advance such accounts, we found it surprising that only 6 actually did. In fact, among the few who offered a just-cause account for torture and/or murder, only 4 specifically appealed to national security. In contrast, as we have shown, all 14 interviewees advanced one or more professionalism accounts for torture and/or murder. Perhaps the dominance of such discourse reflects a reduction in the cultural and political legitimacy of just-war accounts of violence and an increase in the cultural acceptability of professionalism for justifying police abuses of power. As we have argued, this shift may point to a deeper cultural change in the industrializing world of ideologies rooted in rationality, instrumentalism, and science (e.g., professionalism) replacing ones appealing to passion and emotion (e.g., just war). Accounts that appeal dispassionately to instrumental values may now be culturally more valid than those suggesting a deep emotional commitment to an ultimate expressive value—the "just cause." If this is true, what are the consequences of the reliance on professionalism for legitimizing police violence?

PROFESSIONALIZING POLICE VIOLENCE

Equated with rational, scientifically guided action, professionalism is understood to include specialized training in a particular body of knowledge, a rigid division of labor, a hierarchy of decision making, self-imposed occupational standards, and impersonal and universalistic rules for appointment, promotion, demotion, and remuneration. For policing in Brazil, professionalism has been operationalized through crime-control ideologies and technical militarization (see Chevigny, 1995; Huggins, 1998a; 1998b; for the United States, see Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993). Militarized professionalism, in turn, justifies creating an ever-more-hierarchical police force, fortified by technical crime-fighting squads and the militarized matériel to confront a generalized "enemy." By dividing a population into "good citizens" and "criminals," the militarized crime-control orientation retains the Brazilian military's older Manichaean division of the population: "good citizens" and

“subversives” are transformed into rule-violating “criminal outsiders” to be managed legitimately through heavy and generalized police repression.

Seen as the opposite of “unreason” and unpredictability, professionalism is thought to reduce police violence by increasing “rational” police action. In fact, however, militarized professionalism both increases (see Chevigny, 1995; Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993) and disguises (see Huggins, 1992) police violence. The assumption that rational-legal professional methods guide police behavior ipso facto rules out the possibility that true professionals could be “inappropriately” violent, relegating the police who violate such professional standards to the status of the exceptional. They are “bad apples” in an otherwise conforming, right-thinking, professional police institution.

As for how militarized professionalization fosters police violence, professional domains give substantial autonomy to occupational insiders, allowing police professionals to define and evaluate for themselves what is and is not “excess” violence. Since a secular ideology of professionalism defines professionals as best qualified to help clients eliminate, stabilize, or improve a problem or situation, professional decisions are isolated from outside alternative viewpoints. This means that dependent clients—whether the larger society or alleged law violators—“must respect the moral authority of those whose claim to power” lies in their specialized knowledge and skills (see Bledstein, 1976: 87). Such autonomy and the relative isolation that is granted professional police establish a climate for police abuse of power. As one interviewee—charged with heading a notorious Rio de Janeiro death squad that had killed 100 people—explained, he had “never killed anyone off duty”; his murders were all on-duty and “in the line of duty.”

LEGACIES OF MILITARY RULE: AUTHORITARIANISM IN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

Writing about the causes of torture, Crelinsten (1993: 5) argues that its systematic routine use “is only possible within a closed world imbued with an alternate reality separated from that of conventional morality.” While Crelinsten is correct that torture occurs in and is fostered by isolation, it would be misleading to view it as outside conventional morality. One kind of conventional morality—professionalism—is a modern secular moral ethos that includes a set of principles about right and wrong in which science and reason supposedly guide attitudes and conduct. The professionalism ethos allows relatively autonomous police professionals to decide the acceptability, excusability, or unacceptability of gross human rights violations. Seen as a scientifically based standard for assessing the appropriateness of torture

and/or murder, the secularized, tautological morality of professionalism provides a legitimate justification for police violence: if carried out by professional police acting professionally, police violence is acceptable. Or, as one police official explained, "I don't use . . . violence outside the standard of my conscience as a human being. I'm a conscientious professional. I know what to do and when to do it" (Interview A, Rio, August 1993).

Explaining how language motivates future action, C. Wright Mills (1940: 907) might argue that such vocabularies of motive provide new " 'reasons' for ongoing behavior[; they] mediat[e] and motivat[e] future action." In fact, ideological vocabularies that assume professionalized policing and violence to be oxymoronic help justify and perpetuate police abuse of power. Thus, while police discourse about torture and murder has changed—as authoritarian Brazil has been replaced by formal redemocratization and the "war against subversion" by a "war against crime"—police autonomy continues to allow police professionals in Brazil to commit gross human rights violations. In other words, the police violence of an earlier period has not withered away even during Brazil's redemocratization. In fact, in Brazil's largest cities it has dramatically increased (Dudley, 1998; Huggins, 1998a).

NOTES

1. Since 1985, direct ties to the military have been greatly reduced, although the military police remain highly militarized in both structure and function. While they continue to carry the name "Military Police," they will be referred to as "militarized police" here to avoid any impression that they are like the U.S. Armed Forces Military Police.

2. Brazil's larger and more important regions, including Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo states, had up to three Destacamento de Operações (Internal Defense and Operations Directorate—DOI) organizations attached to a Centro de Operações de Defesa Interna (CODI) intelligence and planning entity (Huggins, 1998b).

3. Mika Haritos Fatorous (University of Thessaloniki, Greece) and I jointly conceived the study. I developed the sampling parameters, carried out all but two interviews, and wrote this article.

4. It is possible that the other 9 interviewees had been involved in torture and/or murder, but this could not be established from either interview narratives or supplementary evidence. Since this analysis will focus only on known torturers and murderers, these interviewees are not included in the analysis. The 4 not yet fully translated are known not to have been involved in torture and/or murder.

5. Applying Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization categories to the interviewees' attributional discourse, it was found that torture was morally justified by (1) denying that it had caused any real harm to society ("denial of injury")—"Brazil is a Catholic country . . . we are used to this kind of behavior—like torture"; (2) claiming that there were no victims of violence who were worthy of consideration ("denial of violence victims")—torture "is used on thieves and assail-

ants because they're men . . . with crocodile tears"; (3) denying personal responsibility for violence ("denial of responsibility")—"when we belong to a machine we may or may not do those things [torture and murder] according to who is . . . directing us"; (4) condemning the condemners—the torturers "get involved in a struggle for society and are [later] condemned for it" by superiors and outsiders; and (5) appealing to a higher loyalty—"we worked as if at war. We were patriots . . . defending our country . . . they were adversaries, the enemy."

6. Interestingly, the only interviewees who advanced a just-cause national security explanation for torture and/or murder were higher police officials. Perhaps, like Brazil's former President Ernesto Geisel, the interviewees who had been police officials still had a strong commitment to the anticommunist national security ideology. It had once justified their ordering, overseeing, and in some cases, carrying out gross human rights violations.

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