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Franz Gmainer-Pranzl und Barbara Schellhammer  
**Erfahrung des »Fremden«**

Mit Beiträgen von Mathias Obert, Yukiko Kuwayama, Barbara Schellhammer,  
Yves Vendé, Bernhard Leistle und anderen

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# Erfahrung des »Fremden«

hg. von Franz Gmainer-Pranzl und Barbara Schellhammer

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SOFIA ELENA MERLI

## The »Silent Machine«: A Philosophical Inquiry into Chile's Torture Apparatus

José Santos Herceg: *Mecanología de la Tortura en el Chile Dictatorial*

Santiago de Chile: Editorial USACH, 2025, 177 pages.

On the night of October 21, 2019, Chile experienced its most severe social upheaval since the return of democracy. This unrest, however, was met with a violent government response under President Sebastián Piñera, which revealed a hidden specter from the past: the practice of torture. As the author states in the *Introduction*, although consistently concealed and denied, torture has a lasting presence in Chile's history, even before the 1973 coup d'état and throughout the subsequent dictatorship. Far from disappearing with the end of authoritarian rule, it simply retreated into the shadows of the police, judicial, and prison systems, where its use remained systematic. However, the events of October 2019 strongly suggested a recurrence of the dynamics seen in September 1973: a dictatorship disguised as democracy. In this environment, torture openly reemerged within the police-political sphere, making itself audible.

As a compelling exploration of the complex phenomenon of torture in Chile, José Santos Herceg's book stands out among a series of publications dealing with the painful period of dictatorship in Chile and its effects on philosophy. Diverging from a victim-centered approach, this study provides a rigorous conceptual analysis of the practice, directly addressing the agency of the torturer to understand the intricate

mechanisms that lead an individual to assume such a role.

This inquiry is particularly resonant considering the historical circumstances of the dictatorship, where many philosophers were unable to continue their work or were forced to leave their country to escape repression. This not only disrupted intellectual life within Chile but also resulted in a displacement of thought, paradoxically catalyzing the global spread of Chilean philosophy.

Central to this work is the provocative thesis that torture in Chile, paralleling the Nazi extermination, can be understood as a »machine«. The text then rigorously examines what it means to conceptualize torture through such a mechanical framework. This application of the machine metaphor appropriately characterizes the study as a »mechanology«. Drawing on Guattari's insight that all machines are products of design, the author embarks on a process akin to *reverse engineering*, retrospectively reconstructing the invisible schemes, diagrams, plans, and equations that constitute this apparatus of torture.

The design of this torture machine demanded the instrumentalization of a vast multitude of individuals, each functioning as a critical component -- much like gears within an intricate mechanism -- thereby acquiring a systemic magnitude. Every piece was me-

ticulously calibrated and configured to fulfill a precise function. This apparatus was continuously planned and refined throughout the dictatorial period, adjusting dynamically to shifting circumstances to guarantee its silent operation. The book effectively articulates these interconnected »gears« and »pieces« of the torture machine across four evocatively titled chapters: Actions, Subjects, Silences, and Purposes. This structure allows for a comprehensive exploration of the practices of control and violence of this apparatus, and its broader social and political implications.

The initial chapter delineates torture not as a singular act, but as a complex action comprised of a plurality of intertwined and coordinated actions. This conglomerate of actions extends far beyond common perception, as it is not merely restricted to the direct infliction of extreme pain and suffering. Crucially, it encompasses a series of remote actions, occurring at a considerable distance from the physical site and time of torture, and often without any direct engagement with the victim. Yet, these are no less integral to the actual perpetration of torture.

Building upon Ferrer y Sánchez-Biosca's theoretical framework, the author distinguishes various types of actions across three spheres – micro (direct contact), meso (medium distance), and macro (the furthest) – based on the perpetrator's proximity to the torture's concrete implementation. To these concentric circles of action, José Santos Herceg acutely introduces a fourth, »supra« sphere. This addition serves to visualize the decisive involvement of *third parties* who either promoted the practice of torture or provided crucial technical support and training, thereby enabling its systematic perpetration. The meticulous examination of at least twenty specific actions gives the reader the perception of the impressive magnitude of the torture machine. It thereby illustrates that, much as with an iceberg, the remote and foundational actions paradoxically constitute the true dimensions of the phenomenon.

The second chapter embarks on an *a posteriori* inductive profile of Chilean torturers, informed by the methodologies of criminal psychology. Within this

non-exhaustive taxonomy, five distinct groups are identified: the believers, mercenaries, bureaucrats, sufferers, and the indifferent, analyzing characteristics that may eventually explain their behavior. Far from asserting a fixed categorization, the study emphasizes the fluid and overlapping nature of these profiles. An additional conclusion from this section is that torture itself, as a machine, tends to produce subjects whose profiles readily adapt to various roles, effectively functioning as specific gears in the practical application of torment.

*Silences*, the third part of the book, delves into an essential facet of the practice of torture in Chile: the very nature of silence. This silence is not simply an instrument, but an encompassing force that permeates the entire phenomenon, acquiring multiple and complex modulations. While integral to the sensory deprivation tactics employed by perpetrators, silence can paradoxically signify a victim's triumph, given torture's aim to extract speech, but also refers to the undecidability of their extreme experience.

Beyond the physical space of torture and the immediate torturer-victim dynamic, silence extends into the broader sphere of secrecy. Torture has consistently been characterized as a »strategic secret«, echoing the Machiavellian principle that effective governance might necessitate »dirty hands«. Furthermore, silence intrinsically involves *third parties* – a category comprising individuals with access to sensitive information, distinct from direct authorities or uniformed personnel. This group importantly encompasses elements of civil society that supported and colluded with the dictatorship. Significantly, torture in Chile operated as a »public secret«: a stealthy machine, yet one not entirely inaudible, precisely because its efficacy depended on generating widespread fear. The text powerfully de-

»This conglomerate of actions extends far beyond common perception, as it is not merely restricted to the direct infliction of extreme pain and suffering. Crucially, it encompasses a series of remote actions, occurring at a considerable distance from the physical site and time of torture, and often without any direct engagement with the victim. Yet, these are no less integral to the actual perpetration of torture.«

monstrates that torture is inextricably linked to silence operating across diverse levels of responsibility, underscoring that the torture machine is a stealthy apparatus.

The final chapter conceptualizes torture as a multipurpose machine, functioning as a coordinated system of intentions. It endeavors to map this »territory of purposes«, charting their various manifestations. At the level of the executioner, the primary aims are often the pursuit of success and recognition, frequently coupled with the desire to experience the pleasure of absolute domination. The state also possesses its own objectives, partially realized through those of its agents, including the extraction of information, but extending crucially to the reshaping of individuals, the terrorization of the populace, and the dismantling of the social fabric. Finally, the phenomenon of torture itself exhibits a purpose: self-sustainability. Indeed, torture not only produces victims but also victimizers.

In conclusion, this silent and autopoietic apparatus produces the precise subjectivities it needs to function, exhibiting an unsettling adaptability to shifting conditions. Its core objective extends beyond any concept of revenge or justice, residing instead entirely in control. A machine whose gears make barely any sound, and that becomes audible only during moments of revolution and social uprising.

Ultimately, Chilean philosophy, particularly its deep engagement with dictatorship, torture, and displacement, provides a rich resource for intercultural thought. By reflecting on the effects of authoritarian rule on a nation's consciousness, this body of work reframes our understanding of human rights and bodily integrity from an intercultural viewpoint. The publication offers a unique reflection on torture, portraying it with Foucauldian echoes as a systemic, organized device engineered to seize the human body and enchain the mind.