

Eradicating Torture: Police Practice and Police Transformation in South Africa

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Since the fall of apartheid, the South African government has made a point out of signing and ratifying international conventions. Because of its legacy, it is argued, South Africa has a special obligation to abide to international human rights standards. Consequently, institutions and policies have been transformed in order to change the violent practices of the past. However, questions remain as to the success of the transformation. In this paper, I explore violent police practices in the light of the convention against torture in post-apartheid South Africa, and argue that although torture in principle is unacceptable, the understanding of torture is animated by the very legacy of the torture ban, that is, the apartheid regime. Torture is associated directly to apartheid, not to present day policing! In part this failure relates to the very transformation that aimed at eradicating torture. Empirically, the paper draws on ethnographic research within the South African police as well as on a one year long media review of torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.