

Times Literary Supplement (April 22, 1994)

For those of us brought up on a diet of *The Arabian Nights* and *Turandot*, much the same distance separates the West and the Orient as lies between our present and our past. Orientalist painting and writing lavished almost as much attention on the cruelty of life under oriental despotism as it did on eastern eroticism. Public beheadings in Iran reawaken questions about ineradicable cultural patterns and the unchanging Orient.

Darius M. Rejali's study shows how misleading such questions can be. He addresses basic problems about punishment in modern settings by exploring the use of torture and correction within a single society across a century and a half of rapid cultural change. Iran is particularly interesting in being the first Muslim country to have committed itself to a process of re-Islamization following a brutal drive for modernity under Pahlavi rule. One of Rejali's most interesting findings is that the Islamic revolution has not eliminated Western forms of power, but given them greater hold over society, and that punishment under the new republic has been shaped, not by classical Islamic ideals, but by the practices of the previous regime. This apparent anomaly makes greater sense when seen in the wider context of a shift from public punishment designed to impress the power of the king on his subjects through the bodies of the victims of state torture to a hidden, clinical process aimed at the correction of the inner life of the deviant.

We are all concerned about torture, but unsure how best to confront it. Rejali does not provide easy answers to this dilemma, least of all, in his analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of current explanations of torture. But he does show with great clarity the rootedness of present-day practices in the needs and methods of modern societies. This is a book of immense importance to anyone wanting to understand how rationality has failed to banish the willful infliction of pain by the state.