The Madres of the Plaza de Mayo and the Reframing of the Victims

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Between 1973 and 1981, thousands of Argentines were victims of political kidnapping by their government. Jorge Rafael Videla and the military junta in Argentina conducted a campaign of state terror against the population wherein any person deemed ‘subversive’ was abducted by the military, never to be seen again. The culture of fear that was fostered in the country prohibited dissent, but a group of mothers desperate to find their missing children resisted. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (the Madres) formed a movement for change, struggling to overcome the public acceptance of the kidnappings by demanding the return of their children in the public sphere. A critical element of their protest was their mobilization of alternative images of the subversives, which ultimately aided in reorienting the social parameters of acceptability around the disappearances.

When the junta assumed power in a coup d’état in 1973, the dictatorship initiated a dirty war against its political opponents, primarily the leftist guerrilla groups and communists (Ocampo). However, the war was also aimed at the general population of Argentina to quell resistance to the regime (Nordstrom 266). Civil institutions and mechanisms to protect citizens from government corruption were dissolved under the guise of state security and surveillance was maintained upon all citizens (Corradi et al. 2). Then the campaign of kidnappings began, which was arbitrarily and brutally conducted.

Those who disappeared were hidden at detention centres, tortured and executed. Their bodies were disposed of in rivers and at sea (Gray 47). Due to the nature of these crimes, the statistics on the number of kidnapped persons vary. The Federation of the Families of the Detained/Disappeared claimed that as of 1985, 30,000 Argentines were abducted (Agosin 3). Argentina’s government commission on the matter verified a minimum of 8,961 cases (Malamud-Goti 59). Argentines came to live in a state of fear because they felt they were in constant danger of being the next target. The empty space left by those who disappeared implied a terrible fate, which no one was eager to raise. The kidnappings dis-abilized a social world where civil resistance was possible (Nordstrom 261). Argentines were unable to maintain any sense of security because the kidnappings were increasingly arbitrary. Willful ignorance arose not due to apathy but because of fear (Nordstrom 261). Each person was concerned with survival and as a result, they became willing to look the other way when others disappeared.

The language around the kidnappings was manipulated to lend legitimacy to this practice. Originally those who disappeared were the “terrorists”; soon they were the “subversives.” The new terminology served as a carte blanche to justify anyone’s abduction. The label of “subversive” mobilized an image of a fundamentally opposed enemy that justified the kidnapping campaign (Stein 94). The government consolidated its authority by constructing this image of an amorphous enemy of the state, a general subversive identity that could easily be applied to any
Originally those who disappeared were the “terrorists”; soon they were the “subversives.” The label of “subversive” mobilized an image of a fundamentally opposed enemy that justified the kidnapping campaign.
The reframing of the subversives as disappeared sons and daughters fundamentally altered the enemy images put forth by the state authorities. The Madres deconstructed the demonized amorphous enemy that the military relied upon to maintain control.

The successes of the Madres’ movement indicate that actions undertaken in the public space have great potential to effect change in the political domain. The junta had attempted to circumvent dissension by dissolving those civil institutions that might have protected the citizens of Argentina from government abuse. However, the Madres were able to inspire domestic and international attention and support for their cause through public social action. The reframing of the subversives as disappeared sons and daughters, an identity with which every human person can identify, fundamentally altered the enemy images put forth by the state authorities. The Madres deconstructed the demonized amorphous enemy that the military relied upon to maintain control. The Madres’ re-imaging of the disappeared unraveled the guise of legitimacy around the kidnappings. The provision of alternative identities for public consumption changed the parameters of social acceptability around the disappearances and the junta was obliged to end the practice of political kidnappings in order to appease the population. The Madres’ success in overcoming the silence and opening a public discourse while raising national and international support for their cause shows that entrenched enemy images can be overcome with discrepant image articulations.

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References


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**CAROLYNE VAN DER MEER**

**Train**

The hills roll and stretch and I wonder at their goldenness turning to green I see the houses the barns the cows the trees flip by as we gather momentum and it looks like a green grey brown blue sea of never-ending images crowding my vision whip by at breakneck speed so vividly blurry it is too real to be real and my thoughts follow the scene changes galloping from moment to moment I am unable to focus on any one thing for longer than a few seconds it is all a blur of green grey brown blue thoughts aching to organize themselves into a pattern of recognition trying to sync up somehow with what I am seeing pass by as I look out

Carolyne Van Der Meer has been working as a journalist and editor for many years and has written for more than 60 publications including The Montreal Gazette, Communication World, Montreal Review of Books, subTerrain, Quill & Quire and the Literary Review of Canada, among others.