

“Los Desaparecidos”

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

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En 1977, les “Madres de la Plaza de Mayo” confrontèrent la dictature de l’Argentine au sujet des enlèvements politiques. Les Madres ont reformulé la perception sociale des victimes, préférant capter l’attention internationale et domestique. Ce mouvement unique des femmes n’a pas dévié de son but premier qui était de chercher les enfants disparus et demander justice pour eux.

En 1977, las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo empezaron a confrontar a la dictadura argentina, denunciando su política de secuestros. Las Madres cambiaron la percepción social de las víctimas de la dictadura atrayendo la atención doméstica e internacional. Este movimiento de mujeres mantiene los mismos objetivos: el de encontrar a sus hijos desaparecidos y procurar justicia para sus muertos.

They can’t negotiate with the blood of our children.
—Hebe de Bonafini, President of Las Madres

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 com-

munists (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-abled 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

target. This artificial enemy was also used to make the population look to the junta for protection. Differences and diversity were presented as an exaggerated danger to the social fabric and the punishment or abolition of anything outside of the norm was promoted (Lechner 29). Argentines were manipulated into fearing civil strife even more than the abuses of its government.

However, there were fourteen mothers looking for their abducted children who began a campaign of their own in Argentina. In April 1977, they publicly opposed the regime by gathering in the Plaza de Mayo to demand informa-

of the security aspect (Sieff and Wright). By mobilizing their common identity of motherhood, the Madres also re-abilized their social worlds. In Argentina at this time, machismo was a powerful social phenomenon that maintained that a woman's traditional place was at home with the children. The kidnappings invaded the home domain and assaulted these women's role as protectors within the home (Guest 54). In response, the Madres left their traditional place within the private house life to protest in the public sphere. Their very presence was a statement, as women did not traditionally have a role in

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tion about their children. They committed to meet every Thursday afternoon at the Plaza de Mayo to pressure the government until their children were returned (Guest 53-4). They were tired of being stonewalled by the authorities.

The Plaza was chosen because of its centrality and symbolism. An obelisk for the 400th anniversary of the founding of the city stands at the centre and the women would walk around it, wearing white kerchiefs embroidered with the names of the disappeared on their heads. By emphasizing their roles as grieving mothers, the Madres were able to reframe how the subversives were perceived by society. Dangerous terrorists were being re-imagined as victimized sons and daughters. The Madres created visual representations of the disappeared, such as photographs attached to their bodies or silhouettes of the missing, to emphasize the very human identity of those abducted (Agosin 18-21). Society was obliged to reconsider the supposed enemies as missing children. The discrepancy between the images of those who were kidnapped was difficult to reconcile and the inconsistency acted as a catalyst for a change in beliefs about the legitimacy of the “disappearances campaign” (Stein 99). The Madres' protest presented contradictory information to the government's account and iterated a very different nature of those who disappeared. Furthermore, their protests tapped into passionate emotions such as desperation, anger, mourning, and love, with which people can easily identify. With few legal or political maneuvers at their disposal, the Madres relied upon symbolic acts of resistance.

The effectiveness of the Madres' counter-campaign is demonstrated by the way in which the terminology was reoriented: “subversives” became “the disappeared.” This new identity of the kidnapped reveals how the social perception of the victims was changing, as the clandestine element of the practice was being emphasized instead

of politics. The numbers of Madres grew from 14 to 5,000 in 1980 (Guest 210). They rallied around their common identity as mothers to bear witness to their experiences and confronted the authoritarian government in the public on moral rather than political grounds.

Initially the government was reluctant to use force against a group of middle-aged women walking around the Plaza once a week for fear of the political backlash. The junta focused on diminishing their legitimacy instead. The press referred to the women as the Locas de la Plaza de Mayo or the ‘mad mummies’ and they were portrayed as unpatriotic zealots during the 1978 World Cup, which earned them public censure (Malumud-Goti 116). Decreasing public support allowed the military to physically harass the women. Finally, the military kidnapped the founding leader of the Madres, Azucena Villaflor, by use of an informant, and blamed it on guerrillas in an effort to dismantle the organization (Ocampo 669-689). Although some women distanced themselves from the movement after that, the Madres persevered and other relatives joined the protests, such as the grandmothers and the children of the disappeared who went on to form their own organizations.

A landmark in the Madres' struggle was the public censure that was roused by decree #22068, which stated that any person missing for more than ninety days should be considered legally dead. This decree would have meant that the authorities could declare a person dead against the wishes of their relatives and kill whoever survived in the detention centres (Guest 209). This decree would have disallowed the Madres' goal of having their children returned and inspired an unprecedented public rejection.

The Madres also drew international attention to the crimes taking place in Argentina. Foreign journalists observed their protests during the World Cup and the

Madres' claims were included in United Nations' and Organization of American States' debates (Ocampo). Economic sanctions from the international community were looming to pressure the government into improving its human rights record, which presented a significant threat to a state already in recovery from an economic crisis (Simpson and Bennet 169). Without the Madres' protests, this foreign attention to Argentina may not have occurred. In 1980, the junta stopped the campaign of kidnappings because the social parameters of acceptability had changed such that the government was now struggling to appease

tions were secondary to the goals of having their children returned or having justice served for their deaths.

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

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the population. The regime shifted its focus to national reconciliation in response.

The Madres' efforts were rewarded through the National Commission on Disappeared Persons in September (CONADEP), 1984, which released the report *Nunca Más* [Never More] documenting the cases of disappearances (Malamud-Goti 59). The Madres have also pushed for justice for those who were executed once the dictatorship crumbled. The military protected its ranks from the legal system. Only eleven people were convicted out of the 481 indictments and even those eleven were pardoned and released (Ocampo). Amnesties were granted under the principle of due obedience; the officers were considered to have been following orders. The Madres are seeking other ways to prosecute the offenders, such as charging them with the kidnapping of children for the babies who were born to prisoners and adopted out to military families ("The Americas, Baby-snatchers"). They remain active in their quest for information and justice.

Especially unique to the Madres as a women's movement is how they were able to use symbols of weakness as sources of strength for their resistance. The gender-associated weakness of their persons and the diapers and kerchiefs representing the helplessness of children constituted a powerful visual critique of the actions of the government. The simplicity of their goal of having their children restored to them both ties them to and distances them from mother politics (Cockburn 38). These women's identities as mothers drew them together to form a collective group identity. However, they are disinclined to be associated with feminism. Many of the Madres expressed that they felt they had little in common with the feminist movement, as their involvement in politics was strictly in relation to the recovery of their children, rather than an equality-based agenda (Guest 407). Any political inclina-

ughters, 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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Brazil, 2009. Photo: Xochitl Rubio

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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

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