Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0t5039x0

Author
Park, Rebekah

Publication Date
2013-05-01

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The past year, I have been working on a book manuscript and three articles based on fieldwork conducted in Córdoba, Argentina, in 2006, 2008, and 2009. My work focuses on former political prisoners who were “disappeared” during the last military dictatorship (1976–1983). These victims of state terrorism were kidnapped and imprisoned for participating in resistance movements, labor unions, and religious organizations that were deemed “subversive” by the military. Unlike the estimated 30,000 Argentines who were taken, never to be seen again, these people later reappeared in regular prisons and were eventually released. Since the end of the dictatorship, Argentina has embarked on a lengthy transitional justice process in an effort to solidify the rule of law and democracy in the country. But although Argentina’s process has become a model for other post-conflict nations, survivors of its secret detention camps were marginalized by both human rights groups and the broader society after their release from prison. Former political prisoners did not form organizations until 2008.

Unpublished Research on Stigma Against Former Political Prisoners

Researching stigma against members of the “disappeared” who reappeared

by Rebekah Park

Argentine Former Political Prisoners After the Dictatorship

Rebekah Park has been a CSW research scholar since 2012. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociocultural Anthropology from UCLA and an M.A. in Applied Medical Anthropology from the University of Amsterdam.
Despite scholarship on Latin America’s transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracies, little has been written on the transition from revolutionary struggle to human rights activism from the perspective of former guerrillas.

And their public presence in the national human rights scene only began in the mid-2000s. My research has focused on the missing voices of former political prisoners, as I am the first scholar to work with an organized group of self-identified political prisoners. Specifically, I examine why these stigmas against survivors developed, the reasons for the formation of political prisoner groups nearly three decades after the dictatorship ended, and the particular motivations and activist practices of former political prisoners within the transitional justice process.

Initially, I had assumed that the former political prisoners were integrated members of the Argentine human rights community, and that they had been a consistent part of the transitional justice process in the truth commission, trials, and memorials. Soon after arriving, I quickly learned that this was not the case, and that the public acknowledgement of political prisoners as victims was a new development. One of the main reasons for the marginalization of former political prisoners revolves around their survival. Relatives of the disappeared victims who remain missing—the desaparecidos—are suspicious of the survivors, often wondering how they survived when their family members did not. Another reason for the stigma surrounding the survivors is the belief that they were left-wing terrorists, an accusation made by the military and perpetuated by democratically elected leaders in the post-dictatorial period through state narratives of the past conflict. According to the official state narrative, known as the “Two Demons Theory,” both the military and left-wing terrorists committed acts of violence during the dictatorship, while the rest of the citizenry was victimized by the two warring sides. Consequently, the needs and perspectives of these former political prisoners have been neglected by the state, society in general, and the human rights movement.

Since the 2000s, memorials and memorialization projects have flourished as a result of sympathetic political leaders and human rights campaigns—the latest development in the transitional justice process in Argentina. In tandem with this development, the image of the disappeared changed from a picture of innocent youth to one of overtly partisan revolutionaries. In the early years of the transitional justice process, victims of the military were depoliticized and gained international sympathy for the torture they were subjected to and the brutal and illegal ways in which they were killed. The 1960s and 1970s were a period of great social upheaval not only in Argentina and Latin America but in the world over, and many of the victims of the military were, in fact, part of social and political movements—a fact that has been stated more publicly in recent years.

I argue that the combination of the opening of memorial sites and the changing image of victims has opened up a public space for the former political prisoners. Their militant identities are no longer uniformly dismissed and their testimonies are vital to the operation of memorial museums at former sites of secret detention camps.

My book manuscript, The Reappeared, is the story of how former political prisoners in Argentina were initially marginalized by the general public and the local human rights movement because of their political support for armed struggles, but were later incorporated into that activist community after the political context changed. Despite scholarship on Latin America’s transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracies, little has been written on the transition from revolutionary struggle
to human rights activism from the perspective of former guerrillas. Without such an analysis, however, we fail to understand human rights’ potential as transformational politics. *The Reappeared* uses an ethnographic approach to explore the relationship between politics and human rights from the perspective of former militants, and argues that human rights has the potential to be political, depending on the meanings and actors.

Another finding from this research is the pattern in which women and men political prisoners narrate their life histories in gendered ways. Although many scholars have already examined how gender ideologies have shaped both identities and narratives, I am interested in how the seemingly stereotypical ways in which the men and women narrate the past reflect how they view their roles in resistance movements. That is, the fact that the men give broad historical narratives in their interviews while women share highly personalized stories from prison is, of course, a reflection of how men and women are shaped by socialization processes. But this difference between the men and women also reveals, I argue, how men and women viewed their own sense of agency. For women, their personal acts of resistance in prison were a form of agency: they resisted the oppressive conditions by refusing to give up information or collaborate. The men, instead of talking about their personal experiences in prison, emphasized their role in large-scale movements in recent Argentine history. These accounts matter because the former political prisoners are seeking to represent themselves as agents and not simply as passive victims. Together, the men and women speak about how they expressed solidarity and resistance in prisons and within broader social movements.

One of the challenges I have come across in my research is explaining why more analyses of Argentina’s dictatorial period and the aftermath are still needed. According to some scholars, the study of Argentine human rights groups that aimed at achieving justice for dictatorial crimes has reached its limit, and our attention should now be turned toward “new” human rights groups and the effects of neoliberal policies. Yet, along with other current scholars of Argentina’s transitional justice process, I have realized that while Argentina’s case is well known—as are the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, the brave mothers who search for their children and the grandmothers who search for their missing grandchildren who were stolen by the military and its supporters—the changing conditions and practices of these “old” human rights groups are constantly evolving, and much is to be gained from learning from these shifts over time. In addition, the impacts of state terrorism have endured despite the fall of the dictatorship. For example, political prisoners who were subject to labor discrimination have suffered economically over the duration of their lives. Without receiving a “Certificate of Good Conduct” from the military state, they were barred from seeking legitimate work. As they reach retirement age, these former political prisoners are still struggling: never having been able to work in the formal sector, they never accrued the kinds of government benefits that could support them in retirement. Little to no research has been done on the impact of a group of citizens having been forced to work in the informal labor force. The themes discussed above are the subject of my two other article manuscripts.

For societies undergoing transitions, the question is not about what kinds of remedies need to be implemented and how their success can be measured but about whether survivors—arguably the most vulnerable victims of state terrorism—have been able to reintegrate back into society, their communities, and families. Attention should be paid not only to the crimes committed during the dictatorial era but also to the crimes that have followed the victims during democratic times—when ordinary assaults replace the spectacular, egregious abuses—as these latter-day acts are no less impactful on victim-survivors.