

The Limits of Kinship Mobilizations and the (A)politics of Human Rights in Argentina

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R E S U M E N

Organismos de derechos humanos como Las Madres y Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo constituyen modelos importantes de activismo ciudadanía en América Latina. Como revelan sus nombres, son modelos particulares de activismo organizado en categorías de parentesco y en gran medida biológicamente definido con lazos afectivos. En lugar de ver a estas organizaciones como la politización de lo que convencionalmente se entiende como el terreno apolítico de la maternidad, en este artículo muestro que lo contrario también puede ocurrir. Movimientos que enfatizan los lazos biológicos y las identidades adquiridas también tienen efectos de despolitización. Porque se percibe que sus actividades radican fuera de la política. Privilegiar las relaciones afectivas como un modo de organización – un evento necesario en la evolución de estos grupos durante la dictadura – ha dado lugar a una paradoja en el desarrollo de estos grupos, los cuales por un lado evitan ser percibidos como participantes de la actividad política, a pesar de desarrollar explícitamente una actividad política. [Argentina, Política, Ciudadano, Derechos Humanos]

A B S T R A C T

Human rights organizations such as the *Mothers* and the *Grandmothers* of the Plaza de Mayo represent important and often imitated models of citizenship activism in Latin America and throughout the world. As their names reveal, they are particular models of activism organized around kinship categories and largely biologically defined affective ties. Rather than see these organizations as politicizing what is conventionally understood to be the apolitical domain of motherhood, this article will show that the reverse has also occurred. Movements emphasizing biological relatedness and embodied identities can have depoliticizing effects for citizenship mobilizations. Their

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activities are perceived to lie outside of politics. Privileging embodied relationships as a mode of organization—a necessary event in the evolution of these groups during the dictatorship—has led to a performative paradox in which groups need to avoid the perception of engaging in the political even while they are explicitly engaged in the political. [Argentina, Politics, Conflict, Social Anthropology, History]

INFORMANTS SOMETIMES have their own concerns that divert interviews from the narrow research interests of anthropologists. I was interviewing an eminent Argentine psychoanalyst,¹ author of numerous works and active in the human rights arena, whose son had been a political prisoner for over a decade. I wanted to interview her about the role psychoanalysts played in the human rights groups, her experience as an expert witness in legal petitions for human rights groups, in particular *Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo), and the traumatic consequences of the dictatorship in relation to her clinical work. She, on the other hand, wanted to talk about citizenship.

“The specific work of the *Grandmothers* is above all a commitment to citizenship,” she opened. As she continued, I tried to gently nudge the conversation back to psychoanalysis. She conceded that citizenship was not a traditional topic of interest for psychoanalysts but persisted in explaining how the *Grandmothers* (alongside the *Mothers* or *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*) served as a rebuke to Freud’s sexist theories regarding women’s “underdeveloped superegos” that precluded wider political participation. The *Grandmothers* and the *Mothers* were instrumental in the emergence of the “woman citizen” in Argentina. Argentines were “slowly acquiring the idea of citizenship” as a result of their actions: “Demonstrating, struggling for causes, and risking one’s own life . . . all has to do with citizenship because citizenship is not a passive position. It is designed to allow for participation and to introduce changes into the world . . . and the *Grandmothers* are a model of this.”

Why the repeated insistence on citizenship rather than human rights? The *Mothers* and the *Grandmothers* are generally considered models of human rights activism rather than citizenship activism. They are paradigmatic social movements taught in university courses throughout the world. After the military dictatorship took power in 1976, it embarked on a systematic campaign of terror directed against political activists, who were kidnapped, tortured and, in the vast majority of cases, murdered, their bodies clandestinely disposed of. Mothers, spurred by the disappearances of their children, took to the streets to find out their fate, eventually joining together in the Plaza de Mayo outside of the presidential palace to begin their silent marches of protest that continue to the present day. The *Grandmothers* formed out of the *Mothers*, after discovering that they were not

only searching for their missing children but their grandchildren as well, who were kidnapped alongside their parents.² In doing so, these women transformed private and personal grief into collective political action and heroically challenged a military dictatorship. After the fall of the dictatorship in 1983, they continued their protests demanding accountability and justice, transcending their individual loss and emerging as internationally renowned human rights activists. There are popular hagiographies of the groups (see Arditti [1999] on the *Grandmothers* or Fisher [1989] and Bouvard [1994] on the *Mothers*).

Why, then, the emphasis on citizenship rather than human rights? At that moment, several interconnected events would have precipitated a discussion of citizenship. First, citizenship as both concept and practice was being called into question. Social scientists were discussing a “crisis of citizenship” in Latin America resulting from widespread social, economic, and political exclusion (see Tulchin and Ruthenberg 2006). Second, new social movements were emerging—the “next generation” of activists involving mass mobilizations of citizens. Finally, human rights organizations that emerged during the dictatorship were cultivating close ties with the government and the political establishment. These latter two developments involved a political transformation that called into question their historic roles in Argentina.

In documenting this ambivalent transition, this article will examine a central issue. As their names reveal, the *Grandmothers* and *Mothers* are particular models of human rights activism. They are groups organized around kinship categories and affective ties. Biological relationships serve as the basis for their activism. In the social science literature, these organizations have largely been hailed for “politicizing” or “revolutionizing” motherhood (Navarro 1989; Bouvard 1994). Rather than see these organizations as politicizing what is conventionally understood to be the apolitical domain of motherhood, this work argues that the reverse has simultaneously occurred. Movements emphasizing biological relatedness and embodied identities can have potentially depoliticizing effects for citizenship mobilizations constrained by a widespread perception that the activities of a human rights organization should lie “outside of politics.” Privileging biological relationships as a mode of organization—a necessary event in the evolution of these groups during the dictatorship—has led to a performative paradox in which groups need to avoid the perception of engaging in political activities even while they are explicitly engaged in such political activities.

This “performative paradox” is an inherent tension for human rights organizations. While citizenship claims are based on membership of a particular nation state, human rights activism is based on universalistic claims that transcend national belonging or other forms of attachments. In such a way, human rights are conventionally understood as a priori (theorized at the “pre-political” level) and thus necessarily precede the rights of citizenship. However, critical work on human

rights has suggested the opposite. The “human” in human rights is constituted by citizenship rather than the reverse. This critique of human rights originates with the work of Hannah Arendt. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she famously argued, “the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human” (1973 [1951]:299), in contrast to rights that stem from membership of a particular community. Over the years, various philosophers and political theorists have developed Arendt’s critique. As Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote, “a human being has rights only if he is other than a human being” (1993:136). Alain Badiou, in his influential polemic *Ethics* (2002), argued that the dominant conception of human rights leads to political impotence. The subject of human rights, born out of catastrophe and “abstract nakedness,” is only a suffering victim who is incapable of constructing an emancipatory politics (see also Žižek 2005). Chantal Mouffe, in particular, has addressed problems arising in the recent global “antipolitical” trend organized around the “moralization of politics” (2005).

In these critiques, human rights are seen to represent a depoliticized politics. According to recent scholarship, this also forms part of the distinctive context in which the human rights movement emerged. In Argentina, the rise of human rights organizations is inextricably linked to the events of the dictatorship, but this was also part of a larger global context. As historian Samuel Moyn shows in *The Last Utopia* (2010), the rise of international human rights in the 1970s was the result of a global political disillusionment on the left during the Cold War. Part of the appeal of human rights was that it provided a new language for political action that was seen to transcend politics and form a new global morality. This new language of human rights entails a “moral displacement of politics,” heralding a move from “the politics of the state to the morality of the globe, which now defines contemporary aspirations” (2010:43). In Latin America, Moyn argues that human rights emerged as a result of “an alteration of plausible hopes” (2010:141) linked to the failures of radical political transformation and armed political struggle.³ The appeal of human rights in the region was based “on the failure of more maximal visions of political transformation and the opening of the avenue of moral criticism in a moment of political closure” (2010:141). The breakthrough of human rights in the 1970s, then, of which Argentina provides an important example, was both born out of and dependent on this depoliticized moral language in which morality becomes a substitute for politics. In Argentina, human rights organizations have been trapped within this antipolitics of morality. On one hand, their broad legitimacy and appeal as human rights organizations stem from moral criticism (that what happened to their children was abhorrent), while at the same time they have attempted to articulate a bolder political vision whose legitimacy cannot rest on moral distinctions (right and wrong) but on political ones (right and left).

From a Politics of Dead Bodies to Embodied Politics

To illuminate this, it is useful to highlight how dueling conceptions of the disappeared shape the discourse of Argentine human rights organizations: as dead bodies and as active political agents. As historian Thomas Laqueur writes (2002), human rights activities are focused on dead bodies, or what he terms the *corpus delicti*, or the “body of the crime.” In the aftermath of mass human rights abuses, forensic anthropologists work to exhume bodies in order to investigate and substantiate the crimes. At the same time, a focus on dead bodies is believed to serve the psychological needs of family members. The family’s need to mourn entails their need to find out what happened, locate and identify bodies, and eventually bury them.

However, dead bodies are not simply the objects of human rights efforts via their exhumation and identification by forensic scientists and their subsequent (re)burials. In this process, they are transformed into subjects and active agents. In Laqueur’s words, a dead body becomes “an articulate witness” (2002:77). In the forensic anthropology literature, dead bodies have “voices” that “speak”: they tell stories of what happened to them, they act as witnesses, they identify perpetrators, and they demand justice. In the struggle for human rights in the aftermath of mass violence, the dead body is transformed from the central object in the human rights struggle for postviolence accountability into the central protagonist. Laqueur questions “[w]hy the corpus delicti has assumed this prominence in how we think of human rights violations” (2002:76). To answer, human rights discourse needs victims. However much endowed with subjectivity and agency, dead bodies remain victims of what happened to them. The language they “speak” is limited to their roles as victims of terror—how they were tortured, how they were executed, and where they were buried.

Argentina was the first location in the world where incipient forensic anthropology technologies were applied to human rights work. The *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense* (Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team) was formed in the aftermath of the dictatorship and is now active in investigations throughout the world. Although Argentina provides the foundational case study for human rights activities focused on dead bodies, it has also provided a radical critique to a human rights politics centered on dead bodies. Among human rights organizations, both widespread ambivalence and outright resistance exist to a conception of the disappeared as *corpus delicti*. For human rights organizations, the disappeared are not defined by their material traces in the present; they are defined by their political activism. In other words, they are not defined by their disappearance but, rather, they are defined by the underlying cause for their disappearance. Recuperation of the bodies, then, is considered less important for human rights groups than recuperation of their political activism. If forensic anthropology posits dead

bodies as the key protagonists in the human rights struggle, in Argentina, the dominant protagonists to emerge in the human rights struggle were the family members/activists.

The emergence of the family member as key protagonist involved a process of transformation involving the symbolic incorporation of the disappeared by the family members as they “took on” the political activism of their family member. In this process, the disappeared live on in the actions of their family members/activists. For example, in the words of one of the leaders of the *Mothers*, Hebe de Bonafini,

For children, mothers never die. And for mothers, neither do their children. I tell you that every Thursday a miracle of resurrection takes place in the Plaza [de Mayo]. Our children are resuscitated every Thursday because we speak with their voice, we see through their eyes, and at times, we walk with their steps. (Speech in the Plaza de Mayo)

At the *Mothers*'s annual mental health conference, Bonafini gave a speech in which she chided the mental health practitioners present for wanting to “get inside of their heads”: “Psychologists always want to know what’s inside of us. It’s simple,” she retorted, “Our children are inside of us.” Bonafini represents the more radical wing of human rights organizations.⁴ The original *Mothers* group split into two separate groups in 2004: *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, led by Bonafini and *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora* (Founding Line Mothers), led by a group of mothers who opposed Bonafini’s leadership and tactics. One of Bonafini’s most polemical positions is a rejection of exhumations, which is tied to rejection of a view of the disappeared as dead bodies. Bonafini’s position may represent an extreme one but the other family member organizations also express ambivalence over a politics of dead bodies, and embrace conceptions of the disappeared as active political agents whose politics they have incorporated.

In the words of my informant, “citizenship is not a passive position.” A politics of dead bodies assumes the passive position of victims. For Argentine human rights groups, an ethics of political action is prioritized over an ethics of dead bodies. This emphasis on political action recalls the vindication of what Hannah Arendt termed *la vita activa* in *The Human Condition* (1958). Within their individual and collective narratives, family members offer a celebration of engaged political struggle—a way in which value and meaning are created through action. Their narratives reveal an Arendtian definition of politics as the entering of collective action into the public domain. *Mothers* and *Grandmothers* will speak of the decisive moment they decided to go to the Plaza de Mayo to join others to demand to know the whereabouts of their children. Many refer to this as their “second life” or when they were “born again,” as only their political activism allowed them to find meaning when confronted with the loss of their child. Political action thus defines the groups. This is how they became models of citizenship. At the same

time, within this Arendtian model, political action opens a debate, a struggle, and a renegotiation among actors with different positions. Reclaiming these groups as citizenship movements based on political action is a means of eschewing the depoliticizing universalism of human rights in addition to the particular human rights focus on dead bodies.

Democracy's Discontents: The Latin American Crisis in Citizenship

At the same time as family-member human rights organizations were being hailed as model citizens, social scientists were identifying “gaps,” “conundrums,” and “paradoxes” in Latin American citizenship. The waves of democratization throughout the region in the 1980s spawned a backlash in the 1990s and 2000s in the wake of economic crises and growing insecurity. Citizens were considered dissatisfied with democracy. Discontent was so profound that disaffected masses were considered a threat to democracy, even if disenchantment was not with the idea of democracy but with the perceived quality of democracy (Lagos Cruz-Coke 2001). The discontent is a product of exclusion: access to citizenship is limited by vast socioeconomic disparities throughout the region (Oxhorn 2003). Social inequality and the civil insecurity that is spawned by great disparities constitute the major impediment to democratic governance (Vilas 1997). As Holston (2007) argues, democratization involves a “disjunctive process” in which national belonging is unevenly distributed.

One dominant explanation accounts for this. Waves of democratizations in the region were accompanied by waves of privatization and other neoliberal reforms. The crisis of citizenship is a direct result of neoliberal reforms that fragmented civil society and weakened the state as its responsibilities were moved to the private sector. As a result, individuals no longer trust state institutions to secure their civil rights and are less likely to look toward politics as having solutions to their problems. Lack of concern and interest in politics ensues, a consequence of a belief that political institutions are inoperable. Neoliberal democratization thus results in what has been termed “neo-liberal citizenship regimes” (Hagopian 2006:70). In these regimes, as the other articles in this issue also demonstrate, responsibility is radically individualized at the same time that the detrimental economic consequences of neoliberalization reduce capacities of individuals to exercise rights (Taylor 2004).

By the late 1990s, Argentina had become a global poster child for the calamitous consequences of neoliberal reforms. In late 2001 and early 2002, as a result of neoliberal reforms instituted in the 1980s and 1990s, Argentina was on the brink of ruin, a failed economy, and a collapsed government. At the same time, the economic crisis and subsequent political instability turned Argentina into a hotbed for new

social movements. In particular, *piquetero* organizations formed by unemployed workers became symbols of the economic crisis, gaining international visibility during the December 2001 protests that led to a state of siege and President Fernando de la Rúa's resignation. Since unemployed workers cannot strike, their protests largely consisted of blocking roads and bridges. The groups are called *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados* (the Unemployed Workers Movement, or MTD). While mass mobilizations—such as those taking place in Argentina during the economic crisis—are often considered a positive sign of citizen engagement, they can also be understood as a symptom of marginalization and exclusion (Tulchin and Ruthenburg 2006). In this sense, rather than an exercise of rights, *piquetero* mobilizations are better understood as a demand for recognition of the basic rights of citizens. These groups are largely demanding employment and social welfare.

Interest in these new social movements is widespread. In the words of Marcela López Levy, "Participants of the international movement searching for the possibility of a better world found the novel initiatives taken in Argentina hugely inspiring" (2004:118). According to John Holloway, who works closely with the Zapatista movement in Mexico, "the struggles in Argentina are one of the most important rays of hope in the world in the last years" (2004:9). Holloway cites the movement as important not only for Argentina but for the world, as an empirical example of his anarchist-autonomist take on Marxism, "a movement that wants to change the world without taking power" (Holloway 2002). Similarly, others hail these movements as examples of *horizontalidad* (horizontalism), a concept coined to describe new Argentine social movements that emphasize direct democratic participation and participatory economics (Sitrin 2005).

With expanding interest in such movements, activist-oriented social scientists, who less than a decade earlier would have been studying human rights groups and issues of memory resulting from the dictatorship, flocked to the *piquetero* movement (Alcañiz and Scheier 2007; Garay 2007)—the MTD, neighborhood associations (Dinerstein 2002), worker occupied factories (Ranis 2006), and other popular manifestations against neoliberalism (Schoijet 2005; Auyero 2006; Vilas 2006). To certain social scientists, studying human rights organizations emerging out of the dictatorship is outmoded. For example, a North American Latin Americanist criticized me at a conference for addressing the topic of human rights in the present. "You are speaking in a 1990s discourse," he said, even though my talk was confined to events taking place in the new millennium. His comment was an insinuation of obsolescence. Human rights groups that emerged during the dictatorship were perceived to be largely irrelevant to "what was really going down on the ground" in the present (i.e., the contemporary Argentine political struggles described above). In this sense, for the psychoanalyst to speak of the *Grandmothers*

and *Mothers* in terms of their broader legacy of civic action is an assertion of their continued relevance in the present.

Human Rights Groups and the Government

To the dismay of activists interested in the revolutionary potential of postcrisis Argentina, as James Petras lamented in April 2004, “popular insurrection” soon reverted to “normal capitalism.”⁵ What Petras termed a “bourgeois takeover” took place in 2003 after Néstor Kirchner elected president when widely discredited former president Carlos Menem withdrew from a run-off election. He did not win through great popular acclaim but by default; Kirchner received just 22 percent of the vote in the first round. Expectations were low as Kirchner was a relatively unknown governor from the sparsely populated Patagonian province of Santa Cruz and the fifth president to take office since the collapse of the government 18 months earlier. However, Argentina’s subsequent economic growth and steady postcrisis recovery contributed to approval ratings so consistently high (over 70%) that the Council on Hemispheric Affairs concluded in January 2006 that Kirchner was “probably the most popular leader in all of Latin America.”⁶ His wide-reaching popularity was even more surprising considering the most popular slogan on the eve of the election was “*Que se vayan todos*” (All [politicians] must go).

Also unexpected was Kirchner’s embrace of the human rights movement. Shortly after taking power, his government began taking concrete measures to end impunity and restart human rights trials. During the initial democratic transition in the 1980s, trials against military officials had been followed by amnesty laws and pardons: the Kirchner government overturned them. In September 2003, Kirchner addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations for the first time: “The defense of human rights occupies a central place in the new agenda of the Argentine Republic. We are the children of the *Mothers* and *Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, and for that reason, we insist on strengthening the system of protection of human rights and the judgment and condemnation of those who violate them.” For an Argentine president to claim common kinship with the *Mothers* and the *Grandmothers* was historic. Kirchner’s consolidation of support for human rights groups came on the 28th anniversary of the coup on March 24, 2004, when he turned over the *Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de la Armada* (The Mechanics School of the Navy, ESMA, the most notorious detention center during the dictatorship) from the military to the city of Buenos Aires to be transformed into a museum of memory.

At the same time, Kirchner’s economic agenda was a point of contention on the Argentine left: some praised his strong pragmatic positions; others argued they did not go far enough. This remains emblematic of the “New Left” in Latin America

that emerged at a time, as Claudio Lomnitz writes, “when there is no existing alternative economic system” (2007:24). Although Kirchner maintained a strong stance against international monetary organizations, his economic policies were reformist and did not represent a radical break with the policies that caused the crisis. This confused certain human rights activists. For example, Adriana, who disappeared during the dictatorship but survived, believed that any government pursuing justice for the human rights abuses committed by the dictatorship also needed to change the economic system. “What is curious . . . is that Kirchner has taken objective steps toward ending impunity but nevertheless the economic plan continues being the same. That a government could be so contradictory is not something we expected,” she explained in an interview. No contradiction exists for a government to prioritize civil and political rights over economic rights. It is one matter to pursue justice against human rights abuses committed by a dictatorship; it is another to restructure the economic system. Although the two are not intrinsically intertwined, for Argentine human rights activists they historically were. The neoliberal reforms that caused the economic crisis had their origins with the dictatorship. The crisis was the dictatorship’s legacy.

Human rights organizations make frequent links between the dictatorship and the ongoing economic crisis. In the 1990s, protesting neoliberalism became an integral part of the human rights movement’s activities—a self-conscious link that groups forged between activism in the past and in the present (Burchianti 2004). The disappeared became a popular explanation for the country’s economic, social, and political woes. The argument is as follows: the dictatorship disappeared politically active young people who would have become Argentina’s future political leaders and activists (see Grandin 2004 for this argument vis-à-vis Guatemala). They would have been the primary opposition to the neoliberal reforms imposed upon the country. A popular interpretation of the dictatorship is that the 30,000 disappeared were eliminated precisely so that the military’s neoliberal economic plan could be implemented. Without them—the “best of their generation”—the country was left with a corrupt political leadership that triggered the country’s economic collapse. As a popular graffiti found throughout Buenos Aires during the crisis attested, the disappeared were “30,000 reasons not to pay the external debt.” After several years of tense negotiations, refinancing, and restructuring, Kirchner eventually paid off the external debt to the IMF in 2005.

The growing fault lines between human rights groups aligned with Kirchner and their former political allies erupted on the 30th anniversary of the military coup on March 24, 2006. According to tradition, human rights groups led a commemorative protest with left-wing political parties, unions, neighborhood and cultural organizations, and university groups. The organizing group, *Encuentro Memoria Verdad y Justicia* (Memory, Truth and Justice Meeting), was comprised of 365 organizations, including all family member human rights groups, except

Bonafini's *Mothers* group. During the event, organizers read a document attacking Kirchner's government for paying off the external debt, repressing social protest, criminalizing political dissent, and more. While it was read, members of the *Grandmothers* and the *Founding Line Mothers* left the stage in protest. The document had been signed by most of the groups that organized the event. However, family member human rights groups, including the *Grandmothers*, the *Founding Line Mothers*, *Familiares* (Family Members), and *HIJOS* (*Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*, the organization founded by children of the disappeared) refused to sign it. They considered attacks on Kirchner to be a misuse of the commemorative event. Estela Carlotto, president of *Grandmothers*, said, "It is a swindle (*estafa*). They are using grief politically. That they took advantage of the date is both an injustice and a lack of ethics. All the people that came here had to listen to something we did not approve."⁷ Government cabinet head Alberto Fernández went further and called it a "bad" and "appalling" use of collective grief. *Founding Line Mother* Nora Cortiñas distanced herself from all sides: "we don't want either the government or any leftwing party to use us." In the ensuing controversy, another *Mother* complained, "our children ended up being totally forgotten about."⁸

The Apolitics of Human Rights

This controversy reveals several unspoken assumptions about the human rights movement in Argentina. First, the idea that grief was being "used politically" assumes grief is or should be apolitical, that the suffering of parents who have lost children and collective mourning for the disappeared lie outside of political concerns. Hence, attacking the government entailed "forgetting" the disappeared. Signatories to the document maintained that since the disappeared were political activists, the statement was consonant with their beliefs. The document was a means of honoring their memory by engaging in contemporary political struggles rather than empty memorialization. Since the disappeared were defined by their political activism, it could not be an "appalling use of grief" to make a political statement during a commemorative event on their behalf.

Moreover, the criticism that they were politicizing grief is peculiar since the human rights movement in Argentina is predicated on a politics of grief. In the life-history narratives of the majority of *Grandmothers* and *Mothers*, members speak of being apolitical and complacent before the disappearance of their children spurred them into action. "I never was a political activist or even a political supporter. I never even thought about politics," one *Grandmother* told me in documenting her political transformation, which occurred after the disappearance of her son. Their tragedy moved them beyond their limited sphere of interests to become public figures. In this transformation, they assumed the political activism of their

children. Moreover, the success of their movement was predicated on turning their personal grief and loss into all Argentines' grief. This grief became the basis for supporting the political demands of the human rights organizations: accountability and justice.

If accusations of using grief politically appear unfounded, still a tenacious assumption exists among human rights groups that their activities are not political. During interviews with family members, whenever questions turned explicitly to the idea of politics, I encountered explicit resistance to the idea that human rights groups were engaged in political activities. "This is about wrong and right. There are no politics here," a mother whose child was disappeared told me, in a clear reference to the moralization of politics that accompanies human rights discourse. On another occasion, when interviewing members of the psychological team of a human rights group, I asked about family members who did not have the political transformation that other family members describe. I was curious about mothers who were not active in the *Mothers* because they did not agree with their children's politics. Did they have greater difficulties mourning their children's loss? My question drew a blank stare. "We're a human rights organization. We are not involved in politics," a psychologist finally responded.

The representational claim that human rights are apolitical is a pervasive one and is part of the performative contradiction of human rights discussed above. By being the voice of human rights universals, human rights organizations claim an apolitical space in which no political debate exists even when their claims are explicitly political. They form a politics that has no politics. This representational claim is not the fault of the human rights organizations. As I have argued, it is an inherent tension within human rights discourse. The belief that human rights groups are not political is a normative one, and they are expected to engage in an ethics of neutrality. Perceptions of "doing politics" undermine the universal moral legitimacy that human rights groups claim. For this reason, accusing a human rights organization of politics is a common tactic used to discredit them. Although the work of activists is intrinsically political, human rights organizations are trapped in a double bind in which they need to retain the perception of being apolitical. Whether one is sympathetic to the radical critique of Giorgio Agamben or to the classic liberalism of Michael Ignatieff, both concur that human rights organizations need to acknowledge that they form a politics. According to Agamben (1998), when human rights groups do not acknowledge their politics, they feed into the biopolitical power of "bare life" that they ostensibly oppose. For Ignatieff (2000), they are simply making unjustifiable claims.

The *Grandmothers*, generally considered the most "politically moderate" of the family member human rights organizations, have historically benefited from this apolitical perception more than other organizations. For example, the Ford Foundation played an important role in the group's early years by providing

instrumental economic support, including an initial grant in 1985 to help develop a data bank to hold genetic records of family members that would help identify their missing grandchildren. The grant was renewed every year until 1990. A law professor writing on the *Grandmothers*, who looked at Ford Foundation interoffice memoranda, confirmed that the choice of funding the *Grandmothers* rather than other groups was not accidental. She observes, “the Ford Foundation . . . officials viewed the *Abuelas* as less politicized and more practical and realistic than other groups. A Ford Foundation field representative noted . . . ‘The *Abuelas* seem far less politicized and more concerned with finding children than seeking retribution’” (Oren 2001:141–142).

The Biologization of Social Movements

In Argentina, an additional explanation exists for the normative belief and representational claim that family member human rights organizations are apolitical. Throughout fieldwork, I was often told a variation on the following statement. “You know, those (*Mothers*, *Grandmothers*) organizations are political ones. It was one thing what happened to their children but then they became political.” When questioned as to what they meant by “became political,” they had difficulty articulating it. The assumption not only referred to the apolitics of human rights but also to the idea that the familial space of loss—a mother losing a child—was inherently apolitical. Empathy toward mothers who lost their children was one matter (who could not feel pity for the suffering of a mother grieving her child?), their demands for justice and accountability were another. Once they moved beyond their individual loss, collectivized, and began to make claims, they became “political.” Yet, the groups only existed because of this process. A “politics of pity,” which as Arendt points out is predicated on a division between those who suffer and those who do not, formed the basis of their political mobilizations from the onset. Their initial mobilizations were appeals to the empathetic reactions of a largely foreign audience to grieving mothers who lost their children.

In Argentina, human rights organizations that emerged during the military dictatorship are organized around biologically defined kin relationships. As a result, a family structure is created—a matrilineal consanguine family system with Mothers and Grandmothers on top. HIJOS formed the other most visible human rights organization when they emerged in 1995. Others include *Familiares* (family members) and *Hermanos* (brothers and sisters of the disappeared). Anyone active in human rights outside of this kin structure can appear anomalous. At a human rights trial in La Plata, the capital of the province of Buenos Aires, I sat next to two *Mothers*. We talked as we waited for the trial to begin and the name of a human rights lawyer whom I had interviewed the previous week was mentioned. One of the *Mothers* praised his work and then said, “And, you know, he’s not even

a family member.” The comment struck me as strange since I was familiar with his biography. He was active in human rights during the dictatorship and after. He had friends and colleagues who were tortured and disappeared. However, his human rights activism was seen to be surprising because he was not a direct family member. The comment, intended as a compliment, is indicative of the way human rights activism is naturalized and biologized in Argentina. As one *Grandmother* said,

In the Plaza de Mayo, they set the horses upon us and they wanted to scare us into stopping. Nonetheless, they did not achieve this. And it was not because we were heroic or brave women. Rather, it was because this is demanded by blood (*el mandato de la sangre*).⁹

I have written about this privileging of biological relationships and blood in particular elsewhere. Of family member groups, the *Grandmothers* have most explicitly embraced a biological logic, to argue for the restitution of the estimated 500 children of the disappeared who were kidnapped and raised by military families (Gandsman 2009). In doing so, they have seized upon a conventional understanding of kinship that “blood is thicker than water” (in its Spanish idiomatic, *la sangre tira*, literally, “blood pulls”) to pursue their claims. Genetic identification technologies used to locate and identify the bodies of the disappeared, necessary steps for transitional justice, become the basis for an inadvertent privileging of biological relatedness. Two examples of how this privileging works are the marginalization of the ex-disappeared and of the partners of the disappeared within the human rights movement. Indeed, another human rights group in Argentina also exists: the *ex-disappeared*. These people were detained, kidnapped, and tortured but survived. In 1984, several survivors joined together to form the *Asociacion de Ex-Detenidos-Desaparecidos* (Association of Ex-Detainees and Disappeared or *The Ex-Disappeared*). In other contexts of mass atrocity, the survivor emerges as the most visible reference point for the atrocity (as in the Holocaust). In Argentina, the family member occupies that role. The *Ex-Disappeared* lack the national and international stature of the *Mothers* or the *Grandmothers*. In the narrative of human rights in Argentina, family members emerge as the principle protagonists during the dictatorship. Survivors consequently lack the influence, political power, and moral capital of family member groups. Although survivors provide essential testimony, they largely play a pragmatic and supporting role in the human rights struggle.

Human rights organizations are often divided between “directly affected” and “non-affected groups” in Argentina. The term “affected group” is used to describe organizations that are comprised of individuals who are considered direct victims of the dictatorship. This label describes family member organizations—the *Mothers*, the *Grandmothers*, and HIJOS. However, in conversations with human

rights activists and in the human rights literature, the Ex-Disappeared are rarely included in the “directly affected” groups. For example, sociologist Elizabeth Jelin writes of the privileged role of the directly affected victim and refers to family members of the disappeared without even mentioning survivors (2003:34). These kinds of omissions are frequent.

Graciela Daleo is one of the founders of the *Ex-Disappeared*. In an interview from the late 1990s, she explicitly discussed the marginalization of survivors: “Our organization has been in existence for fourteen years of existence yet it still does not register.” The group even organized a seminar that asked whether “the place of the survivor was a non-place,” only to conclude that the ex-disappeared have never been fully allowed to reappear (Daleo, quoted in Fernández 2001:106). She points to the group’s isolation from other human rights groups: “There are very few people connected to the field of human rights organizations that includes [the *Ex-Disappeared*] as one” (Fernández 2001:106). As an example, she cites a seminar the group organized in 1996 at the time of the 20th anniversary of the coup. Although they publicized the seminar within the human rights movement, the same day, the Faculty of Law of the University of Buenos Aires organized an activity around the consequences of the dictatorship. The *Ex-Disappeared* were not even invited. According to Daleo, “We said, ‘there are no survivors there. How can you work on this topic with professionals, scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, human rights specialists, *Mothers*, *Grandmothers*, *HIJOS* and not call our organization?’” (Fernández 2001:106).

Not only are the *Ex-Disappeared* marginalized within the human rights movement, but wives and partners of the disappeared are as well. Family member human rights organizations are structured around consanguineal ties. As a result, consanguines are privileged over affines. While consanguineal family member groups comprise the primary site for remembering the disappeared, there are no widow organizations like those that exist in other contexts (in Guatemala and Rwanda, e.g.). When I mentioned this puzzle in discussion with an Argentine social scientist, he sardonically remarked, “It’s the revenge of the mother-in-law.” Though this can be partially accounted for by the fact that women were targeted for disappearance, the majority of disappeared were men. In 1999, *Pájaros sin Luz* (Birds Without Light) was published—a compilation of the testimonies of wives and partners of the disappeared. Its editor, Noemí Ciollaro, whose husband disappeared, felt compelled to write the book “by the strange void” in which “the voices of the mothers, the children, and the grandchildren have all been heard but the wives have been silenced.” Ciollaro sees the project as a product of her unrecognized grief and a demand for recognition (2000:339). In her appeal for public recognition, she criticizes how their particular suffering has been ignored. Ciollaro also questions why widows were excluded from the category of “directly affected.” Similarly, in the introduction to the book, historian Osvaldo Bayer asks, “Why *Mothers*,

Grandmothers, Children and never the *Wives* of the disappeared?” (1999:11). Ciolaro explicitly blames this absence on a prioritization of biological relationships, “as if only a blood tie legitimized the suffering or the recognition of the disappeared,” and cites a psychologist who worked with human rights groups and treated victims of state terror. When she told him she was working on a book that compiled testimonies of wives of the disappeared, he responded dismissively: “Yes, but the companions of the disappeared have another kind of tie. They remade their lives. They formed other couples. It’s very different” (1999:342). By “another kind of tie,” he was invoking a biological relationship. After all, many of the *Mothers* and *Grandmothers* had children other than the ones who disappeared but that should not make a difference either. In the end, being an affine is considered to be a weaker tie than being a consanguine.

Parenthood in the way that the *Mothers* and *Grandmothers* discuss it is not only a biological relationship but also an embodied identity. More specifically, maternity is an embodied identity. After all, why are there *Mothers* and *Grandmothers* but not *Fathers* and *Grandfathers*? During their initial emergence during the dictatorship, it was because of safety. At the same time, several fathers whose children disappeared founded CELS (*Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales*), a less visible but prominent human rights group that functions today as a watchdog organization. At the same time, the *Mothers* became the public face of resistance. Middle-aged women were not seen as a threat to the military regime. Playing up their role as “helpless mothers who only wanted to know what happened to their children” was necessary in this respect and appealed to cultural ideals of *marianismo*, in which women are considered both morally superior and spiritually stronger than men and in which the “ideal woman” would “inspire pity” (Stevens 1973:97). The idea that their claim was not political was a product of this. In addition, a cultural assumption exists that the maternal bond between mother and child is stronger than the paternal bond between father and child. The intimacy of that bond explains how the *Mothers* become the voice of their disappeared children.

The *Mothers* and the *Grandmothers* frequently invoke their gestational roles as biological mother to justify and describe their activism. For family member groups, there is a similar view of the maternal body as a fertile source of life and action. The oft-cited and much debated “maternal politics” of the *Mothers* are tied to their “body politics” (Schirmer 1994; Howe 2006). For example, when asked about her memories of her children’s births by an interviewer, Bonafini recounts a strange story that does not refer to either: “I remember something that was odd. Together with my first son, I also breastfed the daughter of a neighbor because her mother couldn’t take care of her. Since I didn’t have enough milk for the two, I had to give my son the bottle for a short time. It was to save the life of this child” (Sánchez 1985:57). The maternal body is a source of life and nurturance, not only for her own biological children but also for others. This is an example of

Bonafini's solidarity—her collectivization of maternity. Similar birth metaphors are prevalent in the institutional discourse of the organizations in which they become the “mothers” and “grandmothers” of their supporters.

Bonafini (and other activists) frequently use the phrase *poner el cuerpo* (literally, to put forth one's body or put one's body on the line) to describe their style of activism. In one interview, Bonafini even argues this as being the group's legacy: “the best message that I can leave to you is that I came and put my body on the line. The *Mothers* are accustomed to this. We don't like written missives and I think that this is our message: that everyone has to put their bodies on the line.”¹⁰ In this sense, *Poner el Cuerpo* refers to women's embodied subjectivities as a source of political resistance, or as Barbara Sutton argues, “to put the whole (embodied) being into action, to be committed to a social cause, and to assume the bodily risks, work, and demands of such a commitment” (Sutton 2007:129). Both *Grandmothers* and *Mothers* share the rhetoric of having experienced the dictatorship *en carne propia* (in their own flesh). The importance is placed on lived, bodily experience. As individuals who “lived the dictatorship in their own flesh,” they become literal and physical vessels of remembrance. The *Grandmothers*, on the other hand, emphasize another form of body politics. They speak of the materiality of the body as earlier described as a source of evidence and proof. The exhumations and the *Grandmothers'* National Genetic Data Bank are examples of this.

These views of the body form part of contemporary discourses on citizenship. As Lock and Farquhar write, the body is considered “the only possible basis for the citizen's responsibility to act and to choose” (2007:2). In this case, the “citizen's responsibility to act” is derived from a biological relationship and a corresponding embodied identity. Movements emphasizing these issues have become prominent in contemporary forms of political mobilization described as “biological citizenship.” As described by Rose and Novas, this concept entails a biologization of politics: citizenship projects organized around “beliefs about the biological existence of human beings, as individuals, as families and lineages, as communities, as population and races, and as a species” (2005:440). When informants speak about their activism as a product of biological relatedness, they embrace this citizenship model. Additionally, models that prioritize individual relationships, embodied identities, and affective ties elide the experience and preclude the participation of those who are not biologically related to the disappeared. In the end, these models inadvertently curtail the wider political participation that they desire and end up serving the interests of the neo-liberal citizenship regimes that they ostensibly contest. This reveals the larger tensions between contrasting dimensions of citizenship as argued by Evelina Dagnino, which result in a “confrontation between a democratizing, participatory project of extension of citizenship and the neoliberal offensive to curtail the possibilities that extension announced” (2007:2470).

Conclusion: The Politics of Parents of Dead Children

The structural tensions of the *Mothers* and the *Grandmothers* as both human rights and citizenship models became more apparent as these groups moved closer to the government. In 2005, the accusation of being “too close to power” was made against *Grandmothers*’ president Estela Carlotto. In December 2004, a fire at the República Cromagnon nightclub (*boliche*) caused the deaths of 194 young people. The club, in a working-class neighborhood in Buenos Aires with mostly poor young people in attendance, was not enforcing fire regulations and had squeezed in over 3 thousand spectators for a rock concert when the venue had a legal capacity of one thousand. A firecracker set off by a spectator during the concert hit the ceiling of the club and set off the blaze. The fire spread fast since the illegal insulation was inflammable. Furthermore, the club owner had locked the emergency exit doors with chains. In the aftermath of the tragedy, the family members of the victims united in their grief and, following the pre-existing model, mobilized to demand justice. They ultimately placed responsibility for the fire on the mayor of Buenos Aires, Aníbal Ibarra. At the time, Ibarra was a rising political star, a center-left mayor who had been tipped as a possible vice-president for Kirchner in the next election. Ibarra also had a long trajectory with human rights and had close and longstanding ties with the *Grandmothers*.

Supporters of Ibarra argued that it was unfair to hold him responsible for what was a tragedy and not, as family members called it, a massacre. Inefficiency and neglect marred the inspection system. The club should have been closed but the fire could not be blamed on Ibarra since it involved larger institutional issues that predated his time in office. As family members continued their campaign against Ibarra, Estela Carlotto came out in support of the mayor. The radical left, on the other hand, largely supported Ibarra’s impeachment. A typical assessment described Ibarra as “a playboy progressive” and singled out Carlotto for criticism for her support of him. In August 2005, as family members of the victims of the fire were campaigning against Ibarra, Estela Carlotto was pelted with eggs while exiting a theater after participating in a political event. Those responsible were a number of Cromagnon victim family members angry at her support for Ibarra. They called the attack an *escrache*, a term originally coined by HIJOS to describe their protests against military perpetrators. Family members were upset that she was “in politics” and not accompanying them in their call for justice, a call that entailed Ibarra’s removal from power. They denounced her as a political operative of the government. One mother whose son perished in the fire stated, “she should have been by our side and not Ibarra’s.”¹¹

Although the attack provoked widespread condemnation and rebuke, it marked a reversal. Estela Carlotto, one of the most prominent figures in Argentine human rights (a discourse organized around what Václav Havel famously called “the power

of the powerless”) now represented the establishment figure (an *oficialista*) in a position of political power (the power of the powerful). Treated like a military perpetrator, she was targeted by family members who had lost their children. In the end, Carlotto’s support could not save Ibarra: he was removed from office on March 6, 2006. The human rights movement was divided over this. The *Family Members* organization sided with the *Grandmothers* and the *Founding Line Mothers* marched with the family members of the Cromagnon victims. The *Founding Line Mothers* claimed they did not engage in politics and argued that their role was to always accompany the victim’s family members.¹²

However, it was impossible to “accompany” family members without supporting their demands, which were intrinsically political and included the removal of an elected official from office. The mourning and grief that spurred their demands for justice (a “politics of dead bodies” described at the beginning of this article as based on moral appeal) became impossible to separate from the political content of the demands themselves. Only the underlying assumption that family members have no politics attached to their demands, even when they explicitly do, could lead to such a statement. The idea that one must always accompany family members is an impossible logic, which results from a collusion of morality and politics that shapes the language of human rights and is seemingly an even more impossible logic to resist.

Writing about the Argentine human rights movement in the early 1990s during a period of impunity brought about by amnesties and pardons, political scientist Alison Brysk argued, “Movements whose identity is based on autonomy and ‘apolitical’ independence from state power find it difficult to channel their demands effectively through the new state, and ties with parties (democracy’s designated channel for popular participation) threaten to undercut the legitimacy of movements that are defined as ‘above politics’” (1994:9). What does it mean for the future of these movements now that this “difficulty” has been surmounted and they are effectively channeling their demands through the state? Around the same time, sociologist Elizabeth Jelin (1994) cited classicist Nicole Loraux’s *Mothers in Mourning* to discuss what she identified as a disjuncture between the political demands of the state and the demands of mourning. In her work, Loraux (1998) discusses the Athenian city-state’s terror at the uncontained mourning of mothers who lost their children in wars and how the city-state attempted to regulate and control it (in a way that has prompted numerous social scientists working on the *Mothers*, like Jelin, to cite this work in drawing a historical parallel with Argentina). Maternal grief, in Loraux’s analysis, represented a danger to the political order.

However, according to Loraux’s work, this disjuncture was eventually bridged. The Athenian mothers’ mourning ultimately became assimilated into the political arena, involving what Loraux terms a “domestication” of maternal grief that is

“advantageously converted into a figure of justice” (1998:77). In a similar way, the uncontained grief and mourning of the mothers of the disappeared have now been assimilated into state policy as they have been converted into national figures of justice (their emblematic *pañuelo* itself iconic), a transformation that has only occurred in the new century. In 1999, a magazine cited Hebe Bonafini as one of the “ten Argentine women of the 20th century,” describing her (in language reminiscent of Loraux’s description of grieving Athenian mothers) as having “an intransigence that nests in the remote margins of politics and that is outside of political reason. It is the enraged ethic of victims.”¹³ This ethic is described as “messianic,” with a “complete absence of pragmatism where nothing is negotiated.”¹⁴ Bonafini herself has long positively embraced a discourse of madness to describe her actions, seizing upon a language that was used (*las locas*) by the military dictatorship in order to discredit the *Mothers*. Given her uncompromising reputation, Bonafini’s embrace of Kirchner’s government was surprising. The most representational moment of Bonafini’s new support occurred in 2006 when she announced the final yearly March of Resistance of the *Mothers* (although their weekly marches continue). Declaring there was “no longer an enemy in the *Casa Rosada*,” she called Kirchner a “friend” who had opened his doors to the group. Faced with criticisms from the radical political sector of which she used to be the most visible symbol, she accused them of “not knowing how to do politics” and claims that her willingness to selectively support some of Kirchner’s initiatives indicated the “political maturity” of her *Mothers*. As Kirchner’s power consolidated over time, the government continued its human rights policies, which included numerous trials and convictions of members of the armed forces involved in human rights violations during the dictatorship—most notably the December 2010 conviction and life imprisonment of dictator Jorge Videla. As the *Mothers’* mourning has been assimilated into state policy, the end of one political era in an ongoing democratic transition is signaled in which human rights, a discourse of powerlessness and resistance originating out of the dictatorship’s atrocities, has become integrated into the state.

Notes

¹The interview was part of an ethnographic research project conducted in Argentina over 14 months between 2003 and 2005, and a follow-up trip in December 2008. Interviews were conducted with more than 40 members of Argentine human rights organizations in addition to participant observation research into human rights events and organizational activities.

²An estimated 500 children of the disappeared were handed over to be raised by families with close ties to the military. The particular work of the *Grandmothers* is to identify and reunite these children with their biological relatives.

³In Argentina, one of the emblematic figures of this historic transformation that Moyn documents, from the political utopias of the 1960s and 1970s to the moral utopia of human rights, is Horacio

Verbtsky, one of the country's most prominent investigative journalists. In his youth in the 1970s, he was a member of armed revolutionary organizations. He is currently the head of the Argentine watchdog human rights organizations CELS (*Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales*).

⁴To the point where Bonafini is skeptical about the concept of human rights. Responding to an interviewer who asked her to define human rights for the *Mothers*, she responded, "Human rights are just some words that the United Nations invented years ago with a big declaration and still the whole world violates them. We don't need these grandiloquent words (Kazi 2003:12).

⁵Argentina: De la insurrección popular al "capitalismo normal" by James Petras, *Rebelión*, April 2004, <<http://www.rebelion.org/petras/040618petras.pdf>>. Accessed: July 21, 2010.

⁶Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Peronism Without the Tears," January 27, 2006, <<http://www.coha.org/2006/01/27/argentinanestor-kirchner-peronism-without-the-tears/>>. Accessed: July 21, 2010.

⁷Clarín, March 24, 2006.

⁸Clarín, March 25, 2006.

⁹La Voz del Interior Córdoba, November 9, 2003. She also uses the exact same expression (*el mandato de la sangre*) in a separate interview in *Hoy La Universidad Digital* from June 10, 2005.

¹⁰Interview with Radio Zapote, Mexico City, June 2001.

¹¹Clarín, August 2, 2005.

¹²Página/12, November 15, 2005.

¹³"Las diez argentinas del siglo XX," *Revista Viva*, October 10, 1999.

¹⁴Ibid.

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