

On former political prisoners' right to speak

Rebekah Park

The question about collaboration and treason among survivors of Argentina's concentration camps is so contentious and fraught that I can understand why Ari Gandsman would want to stake his own moral position on the topic, particularly since he has worked with human rights groups in Buenos Aires. My book, *The Reappeared*, is centered on the marginalization of a group of survivors, the former political prisoners, or *ex-presos políticos*, and the difficult issues they raise by speaking out in public about their own experiences and political perspectives. By reporting and dissecting their narratives and experiences, I, of course, invite further discussion on how scholars write about victims in the aftermath of a dictatorship, Argentina's or any other, and how they address accusations by one group of victims against another. I had hoped that after learning about the formation and struggles of the Asociación de Ex Presos Políticos de Córdoba (AEPPC), readers would ask about and reflect on categories of guilt, what qualifies one to be a victim, and what justice might mean for survivors over the long term.

Although I would have preferred a critique focused on the core argument presented in my text and the events happening outside of the nation's capital, I will respond to Gandsman's different approach to ethnography, and to our differences over basic facts. He raises questions about how anthropologists should relate to those they study, and what they decide to write and publish, if at all. He objects to one of the ways in which the *ex-presos políticos* in Córdoba distinguish themselves from another group of organized survivors in Buenos Aires and suggests that scholars maintain a more detached relationship with research subjects, whereas I chose to acknowledge the diversity among the victim groups in

Argentina, while working closely with ex-presos políticos. Our different approaches make for interesting comparisons for other scholars engaging in human rights scholarship.

But before turning to the topic of how one does ethnography, I would like to address a few key misstatements of fact. Gandsman disputes that Argentina's human rights groups are ever presented as a unified front – yet, anyone who has attended a government event hosted by the late President Néstor Kirchner or current President Cristina Fernández knows that the human rights field is often presented as unified – even with the tensions and disagreements that are known to erupt between the different groups. What my work demonstrates is that ex-presos políticos are excluded from even these moments of unity. For instance, at the inauguration of the converted memorial museum at the site of the concentration camp La Perla in Córdoba on 24 March 2009, representatives of the kin-based human rights groups – HIJOS, Abuelas, and Familiares – all delivered speeches to the crowd. The members of the AEPPC, meanwhile, stood in the audience, unacknowledged. This occurrence, which is mentioned in *The Reappeared*, is but one of many when the ex-presos políticos were made separate from those kin-based groups that make up the core of the human rights movement in Argentina. Having spent nearly two years with the ex-presos políticos, their marginalized status in Córdoba was an obvious – and unmentioned – fact, which only serves to highlight the degree to which those other groups are perceived and, indeed, function in a much more unified way.

Another point of difference between Gandsman's and my work has to do with whether or not the disappeared are portrayed as innocent victims. He suggests that 'Argentine human rights activists have long rejected the view of the disappeared as innocent victims', since the 1990s, and it was only at the beginning of the transitional justice process that the establishment of the innocence of the disappeared was required. In my work, I take a more nuanced position. While the disappeared victims did become politicized figures once the state established that the military committed human rights abuses, human rights groups can – and do – still 'turn on' the 'innocent' image of the disappeared. Evidence of this could be seen at the recent trials of former military officials in present-day Argentina, when judges at the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) trial stopped inquiries made into the politics of disappeared detainees, and prosecutors' closing arguments emphasized the innocence of the detainees (Natarajan 2014). Federal prosecutor Alejandro Alagia and his team of lawyers did this in the Atlético-Banco-Olimpo trial, portraying the former guerrillas as simply those who were after 'a dignified life' and 'social justice' (Natarajan 2014). By contrast, the ex-presos políticos have from the beginning had to prove and maintain their innocence at all times. The ex-presos políticos know that they complicate matters in the sense that they cannot be reduced to one generalizable figure that fits neatly into a victim category. It's even more complicated when some ex-presos políticos claim higher moral ground for resisting collaboration with the military.

Another point on which Gandsman and I disagree is that he believes that resistance to breaking under torture is essentially a mythology, and that therefore survivors should not contradict the narratives of other survivors – and that scholars should not voice these views, either. I argue that ex-presos políticos are speaking their truths about their political resistance, and that their views toward other survivors best explain why they started their own movement – and, more importantly, how they formed their identities in a climate of accusation and suspicion.

Another factual error Gandsman makes in his review is his declaration that what happened in Argentina ‘is now legally recognized as genocide’. While human rights activists in Argentina use the word ‘genocide’ to refer to the dictatorship’s crimes, the genocide codes according to international law do not make provisions for people persecuted because of their politics. This is reflected in the trials against former military officials in Argentina. Judge Daniel Obligado coined the term ‘*politicidio*’ (politicide) in the ESMA verdict of Oral Federal Tribunal No. 5 to point out the limits of the genocide concept (Dandan 2011a). While Judge Carlos Rozanski, who presided over the Oral Federal Tribunal No. 1 of La Plata, ruled in the Penitentiary Unit 9 case that the dictatorship’s crimes were committed ‘*en el marco del genocidio cometido entre 1976 y 1983*’ (within the frame of genocide that took place between 1976 and 1983) (Pertot 2006), other judges, such as the judges of Federal Oral Tribunal No. 2, in the case of the Atlético-Banco-Olimpo centers (Dandan 2011b), have rejected this argument outright, in part because those convicted of crimes against humanity cannot then be charged for genocide. Many lawmakers currently understand the protocols on genocide and the protocols on crimes against humanity to be distinct.

Important as it is to correct the record on these matters, the key to my disagreement with Gandsman pertains to the essential question of how anthropologists should approach ethnography, both in terms of methods and writing. Gandsman and I differ over what can be said aloud and what is forbidden. My choice to voice the accusation made by some ex-presos políticos against other survivors was not one taken lightly. During my fieldwork, several ex-presos políticos criticized academics for taking the ‘enlightened’ position that all survivors were victims in such extreme conditions that none could be attacked for any moral transgressions. I am one of those academics – but the ex-presos políticos saw it differently. To not voice their own self-identification would have been another means of silencing them. For scholars the challenge is not to determine which victims are more or less innocent, but rather to challenge the human rights paradigm that forces victims to prove their innocence in order to gain sympathy, as I argue in my book.

On two separate occasions, after presenting my work, other scholars focused on Argentina revealed that the human rights groups that they worked with were ‘two-faced’ about

survivors, welcoming their help and testimony during trials but then calling them traitors behind their backs. Clearly, the sensitivities around accusations of collaboration and treason are not the making of the ex-presos políticos in Córdoba, but reflect the broader paradigm of the human rights framework employed in Argentina, and elsewhere. People living in the aftermath of dictatorships want to make sense of why some lived and others died, and to that question, no one but the torturers will know the answer.

Gandsman's main criticism of my ethnographic approach is that I do not take the ex-presos políticos' contradictory actions and views about other human rights groups to task. Any scholar who has worked with human rights groups in Argentina knows that it is virtually impossible to build the same level of trust and intimacy with all of the different human rights groups. My strong ties to the ex-presos políticos engendered skepticism from other human rights groups; my work is intentionally focused on ex-presos políticos as its purpose is to figure out how ex-presos políticos fit into the larger human rights history and movement in Argentina. My work captured a significant shift in the human rights movement for ex-presos políticos, and since my investigation, much has continued to happen by way of legislation and trials of military officials.

As to the other criticisms Gandsman has of my work, I address them briefly one by one. First, Gandsman refers to developments and organizations in Buenos Aires as a source of comparison, but my book is evidence that the human rights movement in Buenos Aires cannot be generalized to the rest of Argentina any more than what happens in New York City can be assumed to apply to the rest of the United States. Second, my observation that the dual presence of memories of the disappeared and the ex-presos políticos at a memorial museum was an opportunity to bring together conversations on revolutionary movements and the repression for those guiding the tours and the visitors, not for academics. What is said academically is not necessarily how visitors and tour guides discuss the dictatorship in the halls of memorial museums. Third, I use the term 'post-transitional justice' because it was after the first set of reparations that the ex-presos políticos fought for additional reparations, in the form of monthly pensions as an acknowledgment of the state's wrongdoing toward them and the social discrimination they suffered after imprisonment. The first set of reparations were inextricably linked to other transitional justice efforts, namely the pardon and amnesty. When ex-presos políticos organized nationally, politicians and lawyers advised them to lobby their individual provincial legislatures. Unlike the previous transitional justice efforts, such as the truth commission and trials, the pensions sought by ex-presos políticos were not seen as tied to national healing processes. 'Post-transitional justice' is the appropriate term for what the ex-presos políticos have been fighting for, how they fought for it, and how and why those who qualify ultimately received the monthly pensions.

Lastly, the ex-presos políticos told stories about their imprisonment through the lens of resistance and solidarity. While some, like Gandsman, may view the stories only as horrors, the ex-presos políticos shared memories with dark humor and saw their stories as proof of their resistance and solidarity. To state that the ex-presos políticos' experience in prison is only about torture is to miss the point. Ex-presos políticos believe that telling their histories is a form of political activism. For those who were exiled internally, they view their participation in the ex-presos políticos movement as proof of their resilience – proof that the military did not break them down. They might have had to go underground during the dictatorship but they argue that they stayed true to their beliefs, to their communities, to their labor activism afterward. At the time that I studied the ex-presos políticos in Córdoba, the main topic of conversation was their public sharing of their experiences in prison because they hadn't had the ability to do it before. This is why my book focuses on their telling of the dictatorial past, as they had been silenced. After I left the field, the ex-presos políticos got their own office and began engaging in other types of political work – a progression seen in the other human rights groups like Madres and Abuelas. Perhaps this is reason for scholars to continue to study ex-presos políticos today, for their perspectives are a crucial part of Argentina's history.

About the author

Rebekah Park is a Research Scholar with UCLA's Center for the Study on Women and works as an applied social scientist with ReD Associates.

References

- Dandan, Alejandra. 2011a. 'En este juicio quedó totalmente evidenciado el horror'. *Página 12*. 7 Accessed April 2015. <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-180165-2011-10-31.html>.
- Dandan, Alejandra. 2011b. 'Para que las codnena sean por genocidio'. *Página 12*. Accessed 7 April 2015. <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-168506-2011-05-20.html>.
- Natarajan, Ram. 2014. 'The Power of Memory: Officers, Trials, and the Aftermath of Military Rule'. PhD diss., New York University.
- Pertot, Werner. 2006. 'El juicio fue la suma de la historia'. *Página 12*. Accessed 7 April 2015. <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-73818-2006-10-01.html>.