Power and Resistance: Relatives of the Disappeared and the Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America

Jennifer Schirmer
1994-96 Henry Luce Fellow
in Religion and Public Policy
Class Meetings: Tuesdays 3:00-5:00 pm, Rockefeller Hall

Course Description: Female relatives of the detained-disappeared have challenged repressive regimes in Latin America in the language of human rights, motherhood and sacrifice for the last 20 years. This seminar will examine both the military's justificatory narratives of repression and the forms and narratives of resistance by groups of relatives of the disappeared in 4 countries in Latin America. Using political histories, interviews, testimonies, church and military documents from Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador and Argentina, the story of these women's extraordinary entrance into public politics and their personal transformation unfolds.

We will ask: what sociopolitical, cultural and religious forces and beliefs motivate repression and instigate resistance; what is it in the nature of Judeo-Christian discourse and imagery that allows for the possibility of interplay: how and why do both the military and the relatives, ironically, speak of "sacrifice" and demand respect for Motherhood and the Family; how are the beliefs of the relatives translated into a politics of justice; and finally, what role does the church play in each country?

Requirements: Regular class attendance and participation, reading of all required materials, a biweekly 2-3-page essay, and a 20-page research paper on a topic chosen in consultation with me.

Course Materials: The following books are available for purchase in the Divinity School Bookstore:

- Juan Corradi, Fagen & Garreton Fear at the Edge 1992 University of California Press
- Lynn Stephen Hear My Testimony: Maria Teresa Tula 1994 South End Press
- Emilio Mignone Witness to the Truth. The Complicity of Church and Dictatorship in Argentina. 1988 Orbis Books. (translated by Phillip Berryman)
- David Stoll Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala 1993 Columbia University Press
- James Scott Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts 1990 Yale University Press (recommended)
- 6. Frank Graziano Divine Violence. Spectacle, Psychosexuality and Radical Christianity in the Argentine "Dirty War" 1999 Westview (recommended)

Additional required reading is available on library reserve.

Course Topics and Reading:

6 February Introduction: Cultures of Fear, Cultures of Resistance in Latin America

Discussion topic: What is the nature of power and control undertaken by certain regimes, and how is it that certain groups resist such repressive state power at particular historical moments? What social, cultural and religious beliefs motivate such power and such resistance, and how is it that the same
beliefs and forces can be translated into cults of death on the one hand, and into "just politics" and radicalized motherhood on the other?

13 February Reconceptualizing Resistance: Political Women as Heretics and as Mater Dolorosa

Discussion topic: Historically, women who have refused to accept the boundaries of "knowing" and the kinds of "truth" the Church or the State were offering, have been deemed heretics/witches/subversives, marginalized from their communities, banished or killed. In demanding to know the "Truth" about their missing relatives, the motherist groups ask the historical question: "What is the truth, and who is claiming it?" In challenging the authorities, do they radicalize the very constructions of motherhood?

B. Anderson & J. Zinsser, "The Effects of Christianity" in A History of Their Own pp. 67-84
Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary 1983, chapters 14 & 15 (pp. 206-235)
Temma Kaplan, "Women and Communal Strikes in the Crisis of 1917-1922" in Becoming Visible: Women in European History, pp 429-44

20 February Re-Conceptualizing Resistance in Latin America

Carina Perelli "Youth, Politics and Dictatorship in Uruguay" in Fear at the Edge, pp. 212-235
Arturo Escobar & Sonia Alvarez (eds.) The Making of Social Movements in Latin America, 1992 Boulder: Westview Press, chapter 1, 2 and 10 (John Burdick's "Rethinking the Study of Social Movements: The Case of Christian Base Communities in Urban Brazil" (pp. 1-36, 171-184)

27 February National Security Regimes and Forced Disappearance: Constructing a Culture of Fear

Discussion topic: What are the mechanisms of the censorship of memory practiced by national security states? why do disappearances occur? what religious and ideological discourse and symbols are appropriated to justify repression? what has been the role that the church hierarchy has played during the repressive period--either as complicitous with the military project or as a stalwart protector of human rights groups? how do military officers view the "mothers" of the disappeared?

Reading: Amnesty International/USA "Disappearances: A Workbook" 1981 New York
Juan Corradi, et al Fear at the Edge chapters 3-6, pp. 39-118
Jennifer Schirmer, "Torture" The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World 1993, pp. 914-916
Film: "Your Neighbor's Son" (Amnesty film on the training of torturers)

5 March The "Dirty War" in Argentina

Readings: Emilio Mignone Witness to the Truth The Complicity of Church and Dictatorship in Argentina 1988 (entire)
London: Farrar, Straus, Giroux (entire)
Frank Graziano "Sacrifice and the Surrogate Victim" Divine Violence, ch. 2 & 5, pp. 61-106, 191-226

12 March The Female Relatives of the Disappeared: The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina

Discussion topic: The female relatives of the disappeared of Argentina were the first group in Latin America to protest disappearances. Their role was pivotal in helping to bring the disappearances of their relatives to the attention of the world, and to bring about the fall of Argentina's military regime. Why these women acted as they did and how they created a whole new tactic of resistance will be the central concern of this lecture and discussion.

Reading: J. Schirmer, "'Those who die for life cannot be called dead': Women and Human Rights Protest in Latin America" Harvard Human Rights Yearbook Spring 1988, pp. 41-76

Film to be shown outside of class time: "The Official Story" (a film about the effects of the Dirty War on one family in Argentina)

19 March The Female Relatives of the Disappeared: The Agrupacion of Chile

Discussion topic: Interviews and testimonies describe this group's activities, including chaining themselves to the defunct Congress during Pinochet's reign and presenting writs of habeas corpus. The Vicancate, an umbrella for human rights groups during the repressive Pinochet period, stands in contrast to the Argentine church.


HOLIDAY

2 April The Human Rights Movements in Democratic Chile

Speaker.

Readings: Corradi, et al, ch. 7 (Fruhling's "Resistance to Fear in Chile: The Experience of the Vicaria de la Solidaridad") & 8 (pp. 121-160)

Film to be shown outside of class time: "By Reason or By Force?" (a film about Pinochetism and resistance in Chile in the early 1980s)
9 April The Female Relatives of the Disappeared: The Group of Mutual Support and the CONAVIGUA in Guatemala

Discussion topic: As the first human rights group to endure for more than a few months during the 40 years of repression in Guatemala, we will discuss the actions of the Group of Mutual Support and the indigenous widows's group, CONAVIGUA. Is their protest influenced by beliefs about marianismo (or anti-marianismo among Pentecostals), motherhood, Christian communitarianism, Catholic Action/liberation theology and religious syncretism within the indigenous communities?

E. Debray I, Rigoberta Menchu, ch. x, xi (pp. 56-78)

16 April The Human Rights and Religious Movements in Guatemala

Speaker.

Stoll, David Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala 1993
Archdiocese Human Rights Office of Guatemala: Verdad y Vida: Recuperacion de la Memoria Historica 1995

Film to be shown outside of class time: "When the Mountains Tremble" (a film about massive repression in Guatemala in the early 1980s)

23 April The Female Relative of the Disappeared: The CoMadres of El Salvador

Discussion topic: Since their emergence in 1979, under the aegis of the Archdiocese of Mons. Romero, the CoMadres (who are primarily from peasant backgrounds) have acted in the face of continued and brutal repression. They have had their offices bombed twice, several members disappeared. Yet through the worst repression they continued to organize daycare centers, distribute food and clothing to refugees and today to speak out for the rights of women to fight family abuse and to demand better wages.

Thomas Anderson, Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932. University of Nebraska Press 1981, ch. 1 (pp. 1-12)

30 April The CoMadres of El Salvador

Speaker
6 May The Relatives of the Disappeared and Truth Commissions: What Kinds of Justice?

Discussion topic: With the past such a central political commodity, the politics of blood memory is a crucial factor for social stability, for whoever claims it for themselves is in charge of how history is written and remembered. Throughout Latin America, the Mothers firmly believe that if a society censors its memory and continues to deny the past to its children and grandchildren, then there can be no hope for a just social order of any kind. The class will read and discuss the Truth Commission reports that are available in each of the countries studied.

Readings: Corradi, et al, chapter 13 & 14 (pp. 250-292)
Chipoco, El Derecho a la Verdad. Un Analisis Comparanvo 1992 Latin American Studies Conference paper (20 pages)
Truth Commission Reports on Chile and E1 Salvador

(There is as yet no Truth Commission in Guatemala)