

The Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics

First Prize – 2006

Memory, Loss and Revitalizing Democracy

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

Tracy Ke
Duke University
Durham, NC

PROPERTY OF
The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity
555 Madison Avenue, 20th Floor
New York, NY 10022

NOT FOR PUBLICATION
MATERIAL MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED
IN WHOLE OR IN PART

Memory, Loss and Revitalizing Democracy The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

We still Sing, We still ask. We still dream. We still wait... In spite of the blows aimed at our lives by the resourcefulness of hatred that banished our loved ones into oblivion...

Make them tell us where they have hidden the flower that used to adorn the streets, living out a destiny. Where, where have they gone?

- Victor Heredia

Disappear: To cease to appear to be visible; to vanish from sight. To cease to be present, to depart; to pass from existence, pass away, be lost.

- Oxford English Dictionary

I. Introduction

Every Thursday afternoon at 3:30pm, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo march in front of the Argentine Presidential Palace. They cover their heads with white handkerchiefs, embroidered with the names of their *disappeared* sons and daughters. The Mothers, who first came to the square as a housewives searching for their lost loved ones, have created a political space for themselves as activists, confounding the Argentine government with their persistent unmasking of the truth behind its contrived political façade. What began as a private work of mourning has transfigured the corpses of the *disappeared* into epochal emblems, the unresolved remainder of a messianic energy that refuses to be subdued.¹ Through the Mothers, the imperative to mourn the dead has indeed become living energy, which, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, looks back at the pile of debris, ruins and defeats of the past in an effort to redeem them. Their work is shaped by a sensitivity toward memory and time, for in the aftermath of war and military totalitarianism, the most powerful voice threatens to be that of forgetfulness. Their presence represents an insistence on engaging the past so that they might seize hold of a reminiscence as it flashes up in a moment of danger², such danger being represented today by the attempts of the Argentine government to draw a veil over the *Dirty War*. Not only do the Mothers resist forgetfulness, their resistance has blossomed into a political theory which addresses loss as

central to revitalizing liberal society. The Mothers offer a vision of utopia as a living, participatory democracy whereby totalizing structures are countered by dissidence and dialogue. The promised utopia under constitutional government, the Mothers argue, is impossible without the remembrance of the country's dystopic past. It is imperative that the *disappeared* be made *reappeared* within the realm of the political, for if they are banished into the blind spots of history, so too is any hope of realized utopia for Argentina.

II. Beyond Forgetfulness

"We make the road by walking."

- Antonio Machado

The literary theorist Adelber Avelar noted that the "neo-liberalism implemented in the aftermath of dictatorship is founded on a passive forgetting of its barbaric origins."³ How then, can one use memory to incorporate a dystopic reality into the march towards utopia? The Mothers have embraced this challenge and provided an answer. In the dialectic of triumph and defeat, they have, as an organization, allegorized what survives of the defeated and given voice to those who feel alienated from political structures impervious to their needs. In an effort to reveal the disappearances the junta tried so hard to erase from memory, the Mothers march in weekly processions, wearing white masks and white handkerchiefs to represent the silenced conscience of the *disappeared*. They demonstrate in the streets of Argentina, joined by young students and international human rights activists alike, demanding the return of their sons and daughters. They engage the international community, writing and publishing their own newspaper, *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, and appealing to the United Nations for answers. The Mothers have created an alternative space for remembrance and solidarity through their radical, often impetuous politics. It is a politics which refuses to be alienated at the same time that it refuses centripetal power. Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, whose book *Revolutionizing Motherhood* illuminates many of the themes presented in this essay, details their struggle: "Because they were not admitted into the chambers of governmental power, they claimed the geography of dissent, the Plaza de Mayo,

where Argentina proclaimed its independence from Spain in 1816...In defiance of regime that caused people to retreat into their homes, they take to the open spaces of streets and parks, shouting the truth in a country rendered mute by fear.”⁴ In doing so, the Mothers challenged centered discourse and centered power to be hospitable to truth and memory; they became “vehicles of the political” against a government reflexively concerned with its own existence.

III. From Vocation to Invocation

“But what of invocation, of that which signified that something irreplaceable has gone, perhaps fled or been rendered ineffectual, with the result that the world has been diminished? What is at stake is not mere recognition of loss, but how one works through it.”

- Sheldon Wolin⁵

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was born in 1977 into a national torn asunder by terror and violence. Their voices resounded with a special urgency precisely because such voices had never been heard in Argentine politics. “These women came out of the shadows, out of a cultural, historical and social invisibility, and into the center of the political arena to challenge a repressive government.”⁶ The disappearance of a son or daughter was a devastating personal tragedy for the Mothers, one that undermined the familial space, the very foundation of Argentine society. Searching for their children at police stations, hospitals and army barracks proved fruitless, long days of waiting answered by a disappointing *Come back tomorrow*. But these women stubbornly refused to forget the injustice done to their children, and became “self-proclaimed custodians of a history of terror and oppression.”⁷ By invoking remembrance, the Mothers revealed the power of truth against the grain of premeditated, protean, and ultimately vacuous government. By illuminating the disjunctive, the Mothers defied their identities as victims. Instead, as Bouvard points out, they spoke out truth to the world, claiming what Vaclav Havel called the *power of powerlessness*. Without the reassurances of power, status or education, these women bravely inherited the call of a different kind of revolution.

Similarly, the political theorist Sheldon Wolin wrote of invocation as a response to a certain kind of loss. Invocation is associated with *recalling*, and its genealogy suggests that

sometime is *missing* – an appeal to that which has departed. Wolin was very much concerned with how to memorialize loss theoretically. He was worried that, in a culture which measures life by notions such as progress, development, innovation and modernization, loss tends to be an experience we are advised to *get past*. Echoing Havel, Wolin wrote, “Loss belongs to history, while politics and life are about what is still to be done. Perhaps it is that loss is related to power and powerlessness and hence has a claim upon theory.”⁸

Before the Dirty War, the mothers simply embraced a vocation as home keepers and family guardians. But the move from “mother” to “Mother” would be instantaneous once these women chose to reclaim their children from the junta. They would have a claim upon invocation once they decided that they would not allow their children to disappear from memory. In the beginning, the mothers simply marched counterclockwise along the Plaza, interrupting the unquestioned sphere of dominance at the seat of Argentinean governance. Slowly, they grew bolder, holding up white cardboard figures of their children’s bodies, the physicality of which had been so brutally destroyed. Once separated from their proscribed vocations, society would scorn them, treat them as social pariahs. The government, growing ever more fearful of their influence, terrorized anyone who associated with the Mothers. By the end of the junta, three of the fourteen founding Mothers had *disappeared* themselves. Their offices would be ravaged numerous times. In one particularly brutal instance, policemen on horseback attacked the Mothers in the middle of a march with iron chains. But these women refused to disband, for they had suddenly become something more than singular mothers – they entered into the realm of the political which had rendered them invisible for so long. By recalling the cross-grained ideologies of their children, they moved from vocation to invocation by discovering vocation’s conscience. These women did not forsake their vocations as individual mothers, but they transfigured that solitary occupation, so lonely and powerless in the aftermath of the disappearances, into a process of collective recovery. Their courage in not only recognizing loss, but working through it on a political stage, is what makes them revolutionary.

IV. The Disappeared

The Argentine government has long tried to erase the memory of the Dirty War, characterizing the disappeared as dangerous dissidents and violent subversives. The government controlled media tried to convey a sense of guilt among families of the disappeared by a barrage of slogans such as “*How did you bring up your child?*” or “*They must have been mixed up in something.*”⁹ As Bouvard would write, “The junta intended to create a link between political dissidence and social deviance in public opinion and isolate the families of the disappeared.”¹⁰ While there were in fact extremist groups during the rise of the junta, many of the disappeared were university students, community organizers, young professionals who had no clear political affiliations, but who were strongly motivated to improve the lot of the forgotten and the misunderstood. These young activists sought to *reappear* life in a country morbidly closing in on itself through their passion for change, whether that meant teaching kindergarten in a shanty-town or organizing laborers to demand cleaner drinking water. They were social reformers who wished to create far-reaching change.

In March of 1976, the triumvirate of General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emilion Eduardo Masera, and Brigadier Roman Gosti formed an alliance that would overthrow the last vestiges of the Peronist government in Argentina. They would suspend Congress and install their own Supreme Court appointees. The military junta banned all political parties and political activities; interest groups would no longer have any say in policymaking. Union leaders were imprisoned and labor strikes would be met with military force. The new ruling militia viewed all forms of alternative solidarities, however passive, as subversion. “It put out the doctrine of ideological borders, assigning the military the task of preserving the ‘moral and ideological health of the nation’...Task forces were created to capture and interrogate all members of suspect organizations, their sympathizers, associates, and anyone else who might oppose the government.”¹¹ The military junta aimed to protect what it called Western Civilization, and its

definition of the enemy was “ominously and deliberately loose.”¹² Under the semblance of normalcy, thousands of people were dragged from their homes, their places of work, and the streets by plainclothesmen in fleets of unmarked cars. “Their families and friends were hurled into a limbo a terror and nightmare while the country continued to conduct its business as though nothing had happened.”¹³ By carrying out these raids anonymously, not only would the identities of the disappeared be obliterated, their very disappearances would go unacknowledged. Witnesses were intimidated. Neighbors would turn up their radios in order to block out the sound of the abductions, in fear that they might be next. No one would speak to what s/he saw as the entire country was induced into a tragic passivity. The fear and silence imposed on the people of Argentina was meant to make them disappear as citizens. “Isn’t this just what the junta wanted,” reflected Hebe de Bonafini, Mothers’ leader, “to appear all powerful and to make the people feel impotent?”¹⁴

Against helplessness, the Mothers adopt a politics of hope, preserving and protecting the struggle of their *disappeared* sons and daughters. They realize that their subversive energy is necessary to revitalizing the struggle for human rights. A politics of hope esteems opposition to its policies; it realizes that the lack of opposition at least sterilizes, and at worst destroys, politics itself. Through their courageous insistence on being seen and heard, the Mothers realize that the point of their struggle is not necessarily to arrive at a particular end result; the point of their struggle is not to subdue or *disappear* the *other* but to *acknowledge* and be *acknowledged*. Whereas the hegemonic political discourse in Argentina would like to put a “final stop to the fixation with the past,” the Mothers cry out that their vanquished loved ones cannot afford to have their histories relegated to oblivion.

V. Mourning the Disappeared

“*Bring Them Back Alive!*” the Mothers chant. While it is clear that all of these women realize that they will likely never see their children again, they refuse to presume them dead; instead, they carry forth the wounds of the *disappeared*. For the Mothers, pain is their driving

force, a source of their spiritual strength. “Contrary to the normal process of grieving, during which the agony of loss slowly moves away from the center of one’s concerns,”¹⁵ the Mothers have separated mourning from healing. Mourning is different precisely because it refuses to tritely memorialize and embalm loss – it demands that loss be given a space in the dialogue. “It is not that they do not wish to heal, to recover what is irrevocably lost, but rather, they see their healing as a result of the significance of their mission.”¹⁶ The Mothers strive to keep their children’s dreams of reform alive so that such atrocities never recur. “Let there be no healing of wounds,” they argue. “Let them remain open. Because if the wounds still bleed, there will be no forgetting and our strength will continue to grow.”¹⁷ For the Mothers, the physical annihilation of the *disappeared* does not mean the death of their children’s dreams. They believe themselves to be permanently pregnant with dissident energy, and therefore see no contradiction between “*Bring Them Back Alive!*” and the fact that most of the disappeared have been assassinated. Their chant serves as a reminder and a provocation. “We have given another meaning to death,” the Mothers have said. “To die for a cause has a different meaning, because it’s a death that kills the body, but doesn’t kill the idea. Then it is as if one remains. That is why we are not afraid of death.”¹⁸ The Mothers inform the present that it is the product of a past catastrophe; they, like Benjamin’s philosopher, are convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the threat of despotism if old wounds are not mourned, and through mourning, reawakened.

VI. Radicalizing Motherhood

In refusing to bury the dead, the Mothers refuse to retreat into their private concerns, upholding a vision of democracy that is necessarily contradictory, radical, and cross-grained. As the Mothers themselves have realized, to transform a system is always revolutionary. Bishop Kurt Scharf, a former member of the Resistance against the Nazi regime in Germany once said about the Mothers, “People come to me and complain that the Mothers are too radicalized and I answer, ‘How many imprisoned children have they found? The fate of how many disappeared have they clarified? Was Captain Astiz condemned and the perpetrators of the kidnapping condemned?’

They should continue becoming radicalized.”¹⁹ But many have dismissed the Mothers as simply intransigent, unable to move forward in time, as though democracy was something we progress *towards*. In truth, the Mothers’ preoccupation with the impact of the past reveals itself in a thoroughly future-oriented enterprise: “theirs is an attempt to catalyze a continuous past into the future, seeking to recapture a lost past in hope that it could be restored.”²⁰ To restore the past is not to romanticize history, but to remember present civilization as contemporaneous with past barbarism. As Wolin writes in *Politics and Vision*: “The past is never wholly superseded; it is constantly seeking to be recaptured at the very moment that human thought is seemingly preoccupied with the unique problems of its own time.”²¹ In a country where political imagination was suppressed, the Mothers assumed the role of the political theorist – capturing the old so that it might be distilled into the new. Democracy, the Mothers argue, is not isolated, but alive, associative and argumentative. History and democracy are both permanently open to interrogation, for there is great danger in dialectic collapsing into non-dialectic positivism. Within totalitarian regimes, oppositional forces are banished, disappeared, and relegated to be the debris of progress itself. The Mothers work to separate this debris from the totalizing whole, refuting the neutralizing insistence of tyranny. The past histories of loss and defeat, they assert, are the lifeblood of the political.

The Mothers’ confrontational politics is a way of redefining power to be the recovery of spaces that influence our political lives. Through their continual repetition of the truth and by defining their political vocabulary that unites the public and private spheres, they have forged a space for themselves in political awareness.²² From gathering in the open spaces of the Plaza to speaking in front of an international audience in Geneva, the Mothers trust themselves into the arenas of political power – striving to shape dialogue and reawaken human consciousness. They have claimed this arena for their children from a “government that sought to eliminate them and then deny their very existence, a place where their children receive a social and political existence.”²³ Refused entry to established political institutions, the Mothers gathered on the

streets, the parks, and the churches. Denied access to the means of communication, the mothers traveled throughout the world on speaking tours and gained the attention of parliamentary commissions from Israel, Spain and Italy. For the Mothers, radicalizing democracy is about a return in time and in memory – a transgression against the grain of existing political structures. “We are transgressors,” they claim, “We are revolutionaries because we do not accept things so easily. We are carrying on a different kind of revolution, of women with a different point of view who do not hide.”²⁴

VII. The Mothers and Liberal Democracy

The military junta justified its tactics to the people of Argentina by laying claim to *crisis*. It claimed that Argentina needed a new beginning, a purging of cross-grained ideologies in order to become a new nation, rescued from the problems of its predecessors. The idea of *crisis*, however, according to Wolin, is deeply invested in its etymology from ancient Greek: *Krisis* referred to a condition so grave as to force a turning point. But contrary to the junta’s claims, a turning point is defined by opposition. When the junta installed itself, the turning point never materialized: at the very moment of change, the voices of dissent were *disappeared*. In the place of progress was stasis. The advance of modernization, however, is continually made possible by accompanying displacement and replacement of ideas and voices. The alleged goal of the new establishment was to preserve Western Civilization as an end in itself. In reality, the voices of dissent and perturbation cannot be silenced in order for there to be a new beginning. Political space would collapse and be rendered obsolete precisely if it becomes artificial and manufactured, a totalizing structure that can recognize no alternatives.

The Mothers’ work is labeled as being “radical” because it poses tensions which run against a totalitarian regime that presents itself as the end-all of politics. What the Mothers are practicing is a return to the very source of liberal democracy, the essential radicalism that is inherent in a “government of the people.” It is the vital energy at the center of all living politics, asserting that individuals must not lose their political memory, for then they might discover that

the real source of power is within themselves. Democracy today has a ubiquitous currency. It is vitiated. Individuals and governments constantly invoke democracy but disavow it just as we disavow the violence of our past. We forget that the democracy is rooted in the robust associations and solidarity of the public sphere. The *disappeared* were *allowed* to disappear because civic society fell apart at the moment of totalitarianism. That was precisely the aim of the junta: to use fear and silence to make all Argentinean people *disappear* as citizens. As the Mothers would write, “They meant to *disappear* our national identity.”²⁵ The recovery of national identity, the Mothers argue, can only begin with the courage to critique and engage in politics, to remember that past trauma was antecedent to the current political state.

For Wolin, as it is for the Mothers, danger lurks where there is no notion of opposition, of a turning point. It is when a system seems stabilized and crisis proof that it is the most prone to tyranny.

It is as though the sole motor of change is the one embodied in the system itself; that the system sets the terms and the limits of change so that setbacks do not disrupt the perpetual motion machine...In the official rhetoric, loss is integrated into a system that is presented as too complex, too universal, and too interconnected – in short, so overpowering yet exquisitely sensitive as to forbid any challenging actions.²⁶

This is precisely why the Mothers must remain outside the system. They refuse to live in a “utopia” where loss has been systematized and made innocuous, a utopia whose existence depends symbiotically on the perpetuation of an underlying dystopia. While the military junta in Argentina was dissolved and constitutional government reestablished, the officers of the junta remain in power. Former Argentine President Raul Alfonsín promised the Mothers that he would prosecute the generals and soldiers responsible for the disappearances during his election, but once in power, he pardoned or promoted most of the offending individuals. The Argentine government, now under President Nestor Kirchner has continued to mete out generous sentences for Dirty War crimes because it does want to strain relationships with the powerful military. As much as it claims democracy, the Kirchner regime, like its predecessors, is peculiar because it systematically excludes many of its members from the advantages of “utopia”: the labor forces

are exploited by the growing commoditization of culture and Argentina's ageless divide of the state versus the underclass is more marked than ever. The Mothers march on because they realize that an ideal future does not come naturally *after the revolution*. Democratic society must continually struggle to find a space of liberty and justice for itself. Democracy's power is in its ability to recapture lost ideals, and to rediscover the lost vocabulary of dissidence.

Nevertheless, for the Mothers, what is at issue is not just the vapid notion of dissent itself. It is the status of democracy as standing opposition and the importance to it of the continuous re-creation of political experience.²⁷ The Mothers' vital insight is of democracy as inherently "circumstantial, episodic and fugitive: democracy is an ephemeral phenomena rather than a settled system."²⁸ As it is for Wolin, the actual weakness of democracy is not the consequence of formal attack, but of a judgment that democracy can be managed and, when necessary, ignored. Often, these strategies are couched in terms of managerial efficiency and political stability, the very justifications Kirchner's government now gives for mitigating formal punishment for the guilty. The Mothers' critical role is to crystallize fugitive democracy, a state which must constantly be sought as a moment of experience, a perpetual recovery of memory and loss so as to extend to the wider citizenry the benefits of social cooperation and achievement.²⁹

VIII. Conclusion

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo work tirelessly to revitalize the dying political dialogue in Argentina. Their best hope is to keep the memory of trauma alive so that loss is not systematized, but challenged. Day in and day out, the Mothers work to separate the silence from oblivion, and dissidence from departure. With aims such as these, the Mothers are destined to be oppositional, destined to exercise a radical politics which unmask the brutality of Argentina's past. Their initial goal of bringing back their children has evolved into something much greater than their individual longings. Their work has transformed them into allegorical figures, temporalized tropes of mourning and loss. To mourn the death of dissidence is to keep the possibility of utopia alive, for if dissidence is shaped into a form of political power, then it

becomes a space where power emerges from powerlessness. As long as the memory of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is kept alive, there is hope for Argentina.

Democracy is an inherently disavowable reality.³⁰ The Mothers' subversive energy works to prevent the neutralization of the spirit of the demos. Kirchner's government, like the military junta before it, has tried to embalm public discourse with the rhetoric of stability and nationalism. The Mothers perceive that democracy is embalmed precisely to memorialize its loss of substance.³¹ Substantive democracy – equalizing, participatory, and communal – is necessarily antithetical. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo will always be a radical force precisely because they embody the instability and challenge of democracy. By invoking the cross-grained, they are the source of revitalization that will allow the *new* to be born out of the *old*.

Notes

- ¹ Walter, Benjamin, Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 263.
- ² *Ibid*, 255.
- ³ Idelber Avelar, The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 2.
- ⁴ *Ibid*.
- ⁵ Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," eds. Jason Frank and John Tambornino, Vocations of Political Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000):7.
- ⁶ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (New York: SR Books, 1994) 59.
- ⁷ *Ibid*.
- ⁸ Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," eds. Jason Frank and John Tambornino, Vocations of Political Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 3.
- ⁹ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (New York: SR Books, 1994) 176.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 20.
- ¹² *Ibid*, 23.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 24.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, 124.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 152.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 152.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, 153.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, 155.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, 49.
- ²⁰ Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," eds. Jason Frank and John Tambornino, Vocations of Political Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 20.
- ²¹ Sheldon S. Wolin, Politics and Vision (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004) 24.
- ²² Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (New York: SR Books, 1994) 14.
- ²³ *Ibid*, 254.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 196.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 20.
- ²⁶ Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," eds. Jason Frank and John Tambornino, Vocations of Political Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 17.
- ²⁷ Sheldon S. Wolin, Politics and Vision (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004) 602.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 588.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, 25.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 17.

Bibliography

Avelar, Idelber. Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations: Essays and Reflections. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Bouvard, Marguerite Guzman. Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. New York: SR Books, 1994.

Wolin, Sheldon S., Politics and Vision. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Wolin, Sheldon S., "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation." Vocations of Political Theory. Eds. Jason Frank and John Tambornino. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.