

The reappeared

Argentine former political prisoners

Reviewed by Ari Gandsman

Park, Rebekah, *The Reappeared: Argentine Former Political Prisoners*.
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The human rights movement in Argentina emerged in response to the forced disappearances committed by the military dictatorship that ruled the country between 1976 and 1983. Groundbreaking early successes, including a national investigatory commission leading to trials and convictions of key perpetrators, were followed by amnesties and pardons. Persevering in the face of institutional impunity, human rights activists eventually received official support from the government after the elections of Néstor Kirchner in 2003 and, subsequently, his wife Cristina Fernández. With the Kirchners in power, the government overturned amnesties and pardons, restarted trials, and converted former sites of military atrocities into memorial spaces. Such triumphs, contingent on human rights organizations' close ties to the government, open a space for a more critical evaluation of the Argentine human rights movement, in terms of both its accomplishments and its failings. In the latter sense, Rebekah Park's ethnography *The Reappeared* positions itself as a corrective.

Her starting point is a conspicuous absence. Unlike many other transitional justice movements led by survivors of atrocities, the Argentine human rights movement has been structured around kinship ties. Family members of the disappeared – notably, mothers – emerged as key symbolic figureheads and leaders of the movement. Park's important intervention is to show how human rights organizations ostracized another category of

victim, the *ex-presos*, survivors of forced disappearance who were kidnapped, tortured, and imprisoned but eventually released. Her ethnography documents a small group of former political prisoners in the city of Córdoba who are members of a recent organization, the Asociación de Ex Presos Políticos de Córdoba, or *ex-presos*, that was founded to lobby for their own specific demands.

In giving voice to the *ex-presos*, *The Reappeared* exemplifies the strengths of a nuanced ethnographic approach that stays close to the concerns of informants. Park is a gifted ethnographer, able to build rapport with informants who are often suspicious of outsiders (and not necessarily sympathetic to those coming from the United States), to the extent that they disclosed to her harrowing memories of their treatment at the hands of the dictatorship. Although Park positions her work as a critique of human rights organizations, her ethnography is fiercely committed to a human rights paradigm and follows conventions of traditional human rights ethnographies (see, for example, Beatriz Manz's *Paradise in Ashes*, 2005) in advocating for her informants. Her target is less the concept of human rights than the Argentine human rights movement's omission of the *ex-presos*. If human rights advocacy traditionally positions itself as the 'voice of the voiceless', Park gives voice to those ostensibly made voiceless by the voice of the voiceless, even if, as she acknowledges, the emergence of the *ex-presos* as an organized activist group is a product of the human rights movement's successes.

Such paradoxes are threaded throughout the ethnography. The *ex-presos* are multifaceted informants who survived unspeakable horrors; yet foremost amongst their concerns is a refusal to be seen as traumatized victims. Even though they prefer to be remembered for their political activism, the ethnography focuses far more on what the military did to them and the consequences of this treatment than their activism prior to their disappearance. While emphasizing resilience, the ethnography documents the long-term negative health consequences of being tortured and imprisoned. A chapter ostensibly on solidarity and resistance devotes more space to horrific scenes of torture. Even while her informants reject the category of victimhood, they strategically employ it to make demands for reparations.

The Reappeared is fascinating in presenting these tensions and contradictions. Its unwillingness to fully engage with them represents the ethnography's most serious flaw. One of the more disturbing contradictions emerges in how Park's informants reject unfounded accusations that they survived by collaborating with the military, yet reproduce this same accusation against other survivors. As Park shows, such accusations have been a primary means by which the *ex-presos* were disqualified from the human rights movement. Yet she exhibits poor judgment in voicing informants' claims that a better known and more established

organization of former political prisoners/disappeared, the Asociación Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos (AEDD),¹ were collaborators: ‘Some compañeros – and here I am intentionally avoiding directly attributing remarks to specific individuals – said the AEDD were composed of collaborators, which differentiated them from the ex-presos, who were imprisoned but did not collaborate with their captors to ensure their survival’ (p. 30). Park, at least, admits that such comments are unverifiable ‘gossip’ and ‘speculation’. However, she ‘intentionally’ protects the accusers with anonymity while naming the organization of the accused.

To leave hanging in the public record unsubstantiated allegations of collaboration against another human rights organization comprised of torture victims – an organization with a long and distinguished track record of activism – is egregious. Defaming the AEDD appears to be a means of highlighting the distinctiveness of her informants’ organization and its recent emergence (one that has in comparison a limited track record of advocacy and, as Park writes in her epilogue, had already splintered at the time her book went to press). Park later gives voice to another accusation: that those who testified against military perpetrators were also collaborators. The assumption is that former disappeared who were able to identify military perpetrators were only able to do so because of collaboration, since disappeared were normally kept blindfolded throughout their captivity. Interestingly enough, military perpetrators and their lawyers have made the exact same accusations against these witnesses.

From an academic point of view, such contradictions are fascinating. Survivors who themselves have been delegitimized because of accusations of collaboration reproduce the same accusation against other survivors. However, Park appears less interested in analyzing these contradictions than defending her particular group. The notions of ‘treason’ and ‘collaboration’ in the context of torture and forced disappearance are strange ones, yet rather than problematize the meanings of such categories, Park seems to embrace and legitimize them. This feeds a dubious mythology of heroic resistance against breaking under torture. While infamous cases of collaboration certainly exist – some disappeared ended up participating in kidnappings and even participating in torturing others – known active collaborators did not pursue justice against military perpetrators.

This crystallizes a wider problem in the ethnography, one found in many ethnographic works. The ethnography’s primary strength – its meticulous attunement to her group’s worldview – ends up being its primary weakness. In too willingly engaging in advocacy for

¹ <http://www.exdesaparecidos.org/aedd/quienesomos.php>

her group through the text, Park's concerns become impossible to disassemble from her informants' concerns, and her informants' contradictions, an interesting subject for anthropological analysis, become her own. For example, although the ex-presos wish to be known for their political activism, resistance, and solidarity, Park also discusses their 'internal exile'. This term is commonly used in Argentina for people who were isolated and alienated from political activism and solidarity as a result of the military dictatorship's actions. Internal exile would preclude solidarity and activism, yet the contradiction is left untouched.

By being too ingrained within her informants' worldview, Park also does not sufficiently situate the material within the complexities of the human rights movement in Argentina. For example, Park states that the human rights movement in Argentina 'is often presented as unified' (p. 5). This passive-voiced, source-less attribution creates a straw man since no one with knowledge of human rights in Argentina would make such a presentation given its deep historic divisions. Furthermore, conflicts and disagreements among human rights organizations in Argentina are pervasive and waged in public, often in the pages of the progressive newspaper, *Página/12*.² Ever since the fall of the dictatorship, human rights groups have been subject to splits and fissures resulting from sharp divergences of tactics and goals. Argentina is a perfect case study of how *unmonolithic* human rights can be and how varied its meanings can be depending on the advocate.

Much as I admire the rich ethnographic material in *The Reappeared* and support its core argument, the ethnography would have benefited from more sustained reflection on the broader social, political, and historical field of postdictatorship transitional justice in Argentina. Park views the ex-presos' demand for increased reparations and recognition as indicative of a new era of 'post-transitional justice'. However, her group's demands exist within a far broader institutional context that has seen, over the past two decades, a push for extending reparations to new categories of victims. In particular, Argentines who were forced into exile by the dictatorship have also successfully petitioned for compensation. She does not mention this. The gradual extension of reparations to new categories of human rights victims represents continuity with transitional justice processes and not a new period. Although others have also used this concept (Collins 2010), post-transitional justice does not fit in this case.

Another area that could have enriched the analysis of human rights and its contradictions is the literature on revolutionary organizations in Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Park writes, 'The dual presence of the disappeared and the reappeared, in this case

² <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/>

the ex-presos, invites discussion on why revolutionary movements were seen as the only option to create social change, and what could have taken place instead of disappearances to resolve political differences' (p. 146). But such discussions need not be invited since they have already taken place in Argentine intellectual and historical circles (see, for example, *La Voluntad* (The Will) by Eduardo Anguita and Martín Caparrós, a mammoth five-volume history of Argentine armed revolutionary movements between 1966 and 1978, the first volume of which was published in 1997).

In a similar vein, I can say from my own research that Argentine human rights activists have long rejected the view of the disappeared as innocent victims. Since the 1990s, they have pushed the view of the disappeared as political activists or revolutionaries, in the same way that the ex-presos advocate. Park moves this to a discussion about armed revolutionary movements and how a 'post-transitional period also provides a space to complicate the black-and-white image of victims and perpetrators' (p. 154). But this space has long been complicated. Armed revolutionary movements have been a subject of lively debate among progressive and leftist Argentine intellectuals since the 1990s. To cite one example, a journal called *La Lucha Armada en Argentina* (Armed Struggle in Argentina) was launched in 2005 and dedicated specifically to such discussion.

In Argentina, debates about revolution are often separated from debates about human rights. Historical discussion of armed revolutionary movements and their actions exist in a separate sphere from discussions of the atrocities the military dictatorship committed against them. This is for a good reason. Discussing their commitment to armed struggle, the ethics or legalities of revolutionary means (for example, their organizations' use of violence, including assassinations and kidnappings), their goals and beliefs (most were not democratic), or their leaders (many appear in retrospect simultaneously cynical and delusional) needed to be kept separate from the actions of the military because, even if we like our victims pure as snow, what they thought and did is irrelevant to the crimes committed against them. It risks moral equivalence or justification for the dictatorship's atrocities. In the early years after the dictatorship such equivalences were frequent, which is why the disappeared had to be seen as 'innocent' victims. After decades of struggle, the human rights movement successfully marginalized this point of view. As a result of their efforts, what occurred in Argentina is now legally recognized as genocide and apologists for the military dictatorship are relegated to a small minority. However, as *The Reappeared* shows, the vast accomplishments of the human rights movement in Argentina combined with the distance of time have created a space in which its actions and rhetoric can finally be open to question from sympathetic but critical outsiders. Only when human rights movements rest on stable grounds can their structural absences be safely addressed.

About the author

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