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Review of Political Invisibility and Mobilization: Women against State Violence in Argentina, Yugoslavia, and Liberia

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***Political Invisibility and Mobilization: Women against State Violence in Argentina, Yugoslavia, and Liberia.* Selina Gallo-Cruz. New York, NY: Routledge, 2021, paper, 161 pp., ISBN: 9780367465865.**

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In her book, *Political Invisibility and Mobilization*, Selina Gallo-Cruz conducts a historical analysis of secondary data of three cases of female mobilization during times of extreme state repression to investigate the effect of political invisibility on mobilization in such contexts. The author specifically uses the cases of the Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo in Argentina, the Women in Black in Serbia, and the Women's Peace Movement in Liberia. The author argues that political invisibility allowed the seemingly non-threatening and powerless dissidents a free space for mobilization during the early stages of their campaigns. Women, in the context of civil wars, are overlooked as legitimate political opponents because of their low social status, and they are perceived as harmless and powerless by the regime. Consequently, they escape repression that other more threatening groups suffer from, and they are allowed the opportunity to organize undeterred by their states' extreme repressive tactics.

The author defines political visibility as the result of social regard, relevance, and respect. The women in Argentina, Yugoslavia, and Liberia were disregarded by powerful leaders as inconsequential. Because of that, they were allowed the space to build their political power in relative peace. In addition, each of the three groups was viewed as irrelevant for a part of their existence, which sheltered them from repression for a while. Moreover, groups that are perceived as respected are threatening to powerholders because they can take away their power. The regimes in the three countries, wrongly, did not respect these women as a possible threat. These three groups of women seemed powerless based on their countries' definition of what social location the well regarded, relevant, and respected political opponent should occupy. They, however, became powerful by exploring new ways of resistance inside their own countries and entering the international human rights field.

In chapter 2, the author tracks the journey of the Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo from apolitical mothers of disappeared children to internationally respected human rights defenders. The author shows how some of the mothers of the 30,000 people whom the Argentinian regime kidnapped and disappeared during the "Dirty War" started their activism simply as mothers who were looking for their children. As such, they were dismissed. Their protests on Thursdays at the Plaza De Mayo were not seen as a threat to the regime. When they got some attention from the regime, they were dismissed and ridiculed as "crazy." They were shamed for the disappearance of their children as proof of their failed parenting. The regime accused them of being used by international organizations. Some of them also were targeted for repression leading to their own disappearance. However, in general, these women were allowed to occupy a place in the political sphere that was protected by their assumed insignificance. This temporary shelter from repression allowed them time to experiment and grow as activists. For instance, they learned that the church, their first assumed ally, was not going to be much help. They were able to organize and network their way to the international women's movements and human rights organizations through their non-violent tactics such as sharing narratives, and nonconfrontational action in the Plaza De Mayo.

Review of Political Invisibility and Mobilization:
Women against State Violence in Argentina, Yugoslavia, and Liberia

In Chapter 3, the author tells the story of the Serbian Women in Black, who started their first silent protest in 1991 in the Republic Square to protest the war. Since then, they have inspired Women in Black chapters all over the world. The women also provided sanctuary to those targeted by the state. The Women in Black pledged to be “always disobedient” to hatred and oppression. However, they were not perceived as a real threat to the Serbian regime, who considered those who are against the war or against drawing new boundaries within Yugoslavia as the real threat. They also were less threatening than the rural Muslim women. Their irrelevance as a threat to the regime protected them from extreme repression. The Women in Black started to gain visibility in the mid-1990s and have experienced more repression since then. They created the option of non-violent resistance during a time of war and aggression in Serbia. They also had a noticeable impact on the international legal sphere. Their influence on the international community is apparent in their multiple nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In chapter 4, the author traces the 2000s Women’s Peace Movement in Liberia that was a part of the final negotiations that ended the civil war. The movement helped elect the first female president through a fair election with the highest voter turnout in the history of the country two years later. Because of the history of colonization, Liberian women had different access to political power based on their class standing. Liberian women were present in every political space in the country, but they were not viewed as equals to men. Women were active during and after the war despite their marginalization. They helped the displaced people settle in temporary homes; they collected information about the human cost of the war; and they used their negotiation skills for peace-talks training.

The book adds to the social movement literature by arguing that occupying invisible spaces could be especially beneficial under violent regimes. The author engaged with the framework of fields and the concept of field-shifting. Women who were considered powerless and as such irrelevant to the power struggles were spared extreme repression. In reality, these women were not powerless. They were perceived as powerless because of the sexist, racist, and classist ideologies of the powerful political players in the three countries. The regimes viewed these women as undeserving even of the time and effort needed to repress them. They were not considered a political threat in their countries; however, they were extremely effective advocates in the field of international human rights. Their unimportance in the eyes of the national oppressors allowed them the relative freedoms to pursue international activism. In Argentina, housewives and working-class women seemed less threatening than middle-class men and women, and as such, they escaped repression when the more threatening actors were eliminated. The oppressors were shocked when those women shifted their resistance work from the internal politics to the international field of human rights and called for accountability for the war crimes from all participants of the regime’s atrocities. These women started to travel internationally and share their fight for peace with the international human rights community. In Serbia, the fringe feminist movement seemed non-threatening enough to be spared extreme repression. They also were protected as Serbian citizens. The oppressors did not anticipate their effectiveness in the international persecution of war crimes. The Serbian Women in Black were able to work with international human rights organizations and were a vital part of the UN Security Council Resolution to count rape as a war crime. In Liberia, women who used non-threatening non-violent tactics such as sit-ins, prayer fasts, and dances for peace seemed benign compared to the armed insurgents who were a real threat to the lives of the

warlords. The women lacked qualities that would have caused their elimination. Relatively safe from persecution, the women used their connection to NGOs and gave more visibility to women in the post-conflict period through documentaries and narratives.

The book might prove helpful to activists in contexts of extreme repression. It adds to our understanding of the factors that affect the level of repression that different actors might suffer based on their social locations in such contexts. The practical knowledge gained from this book could be applied to the current campaigns against kidnapping and political imprisonment in Arab countries such as post-uprising Egypt. The El-Sisi regime has been ruling the country with an iron fist since 2014. El-Sisi's regime has been targeting selected activists for unlawful imprisonment and torture in a manner that seemed arbitrary to many. For instance, the autocratic regime kidnapped the January 25, 2011 uprising activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah, and imprisoned and tortured him for most of El-Sisi's time in power, but he did not subject Abd El-Fatah's activist mother or aunt to the same level of repression. Similar to the cases discussed in the book, international human rights organizations have been reaching out to Abdelfattah's family as advocates for the rights of the unlawfully imprisoned political actors. Future research could examine the similarities between the Twitter campaign #FreeAlaa, managed by his female family members to get him released from his political imprisonment to the cases of the women activists in Argentina, Yugoslavia, and Liberia.