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Mothers with a Cause: The Political Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo

In Argentina from 1976 to 1983, thousands of people (up to 30,000) were abducted and killed during the repressive rule of a military dictatorship.¹ This was a time of great loss for many Argentine women. Some lost their children, who were forcibly “disappeared” by the military regime. In hopes of finding answers about their missing family members, women began working together by visiting government offices and police stations in groups. On Thursdays, the women gathered and held signs at the Plaza de Mayo, the main square near several government buildings in Buenos Aires and the center of political life. The women faced intense scrutiny for their activism. As mothers, they were expected to stay in the private, domestic sphere of influence and remain silent in the public arena. But Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo actually used their status of mothers and loss of their children as the reasoning behind their intense activism against Argentina’s military dictatorship.

The women were commonly labeled as apolitical mothers, but their group in itself was political. Even if they claimed to be apolitical, Las Madres were

¹ Bonner, Michelle D. "Defining Rights in Democratization: The Argentine Government and Human Rights Organizations, 1983-2003." *Latin American Politics and Society* 47, no. 4 (2005): 55.

political actors and many spoke on their beliefs regarding women and gender bias. Despite initially being labeled as apolitical mothers, Las Madres became more openly political over time. Las Madres demanded answers from the Argentine government when much was left unsaid.

Additionally, scholars have debated whether Las Madres acted as feminists. Some members did self-identify as such, but others did not. Analysis of interviews and other sources reveal how the public constantly questioned Las Madres' motives and values. Even those who did not identify as feminists did express agreement over basic feminist principles.²

Interest in the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo has focused on the sphere of women's influence in politics under the context of motherhood. The consensus I have found amongst my sources is that the mothers' were drawn to organize into a political group because working as a team was more effective than searching individually for answers.³ This argument has been made through a wide range of lenses. In Fernando J. Bosco's article he brings his background in geography to argue that the emotional connection the Mothers' shared thereby created "widespread networks of activists" emphasizing "a network of social relations" as actors within a social network.⁴ Historian Pieper Mooney Jadwiga points to the

² Saporta Sternbach, Nancy, Zelia Brizeno, and Hebe de Bonafini. "Interview with Hebe De Bonafini:

President of Las Madres De Plaza De Mayo." *Feminist Teacher* 3, no. 1 (1987): 20.

³ Di Marco, Graciela. "Chapter 5: The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza De Mayo Speak." In *Women's*

Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean. Edited by Nathalie Lebon, Elizabeth Maier. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 95-97, 2010.

⁴ Bosco, Fernando J. "The Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Three Decades of Human Rights' Activism:

idea that women can organize for reasons outside of “gender equity or feminist goals”.⁵

I contend that debating over whether these women—who put their safety and reputations on the line by organizing—are feminists or not and apolitical or political, does little in terms of furthering thoughtful discussion because it minimizes discussion of what Las Madres actually accomplished as a human rights organization. The act of organizing was, in fact, a political action, even if initially Las Madres emphasized to the public that they were acting solely as mothers.

The mothers and relatives of the disappeared began looking for answers alone, by calling and visiting police, government and military officials. The women used the security of their collective identity and came together under the shared grief for their children. The women started to stand in the Plaza de Mayo in silence to bring awareness to the atrocities committed by the military regime. They had a public presence “at a time when people were afraid to voice their opinions in public for fear of retaliation.”⁶ The government and the wider public were not helpful or sympathetic to the mothers’ cause and called them “Las Locas,” which means “the crazy women” in Spanish.⁷ However, eventually the

Embeddedness, Emotions, and Social Movements.” In *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, no. 2 (2006). 344.

⁵ Pieper Mooney, Jadwiga E. "Militant Motherhood Re-Visited: Women's Participation and Political Power In Argentina and Chile". *History Compass* 5 no. 3. (2007). 975.

⁶ Bonner, Michelle D. 55-56.

⁷ “Madres De Plaza De Mayo." *Teaching Tolerance*. Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d. Web. 24. Sept. 2014

global community heard their calls for justice and. When the rule of the military dictatorship ended in 1983, the mothers continued to struggle for justice, although this definition of justice expanded to include the prosecution of the military regime.⁸

Las Madres and other “committees for the disappeared were one of the first expressions of female activism in Latin American during the 1970s and 1980s.”⁹ In Graciela Di Marco’s article “The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Speak,” she recognizes the importance the groups had in the long-term history of female political activism in Latin America in the last part of the 20th century. She offers accounts of the mothers and grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in first-person narratives. The wide scope of these interviews show that the women were not only political because of their struggles to find their children, but also just as women in modern society. Nora Cortiñas, a member of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Founding Line, affirms that the women at least attempted working outside of the traditional bounds of activism by staying apolitical, “We were very careful,’ she said, “we still are and we don’t take part in any activities that have to do with political parties ... after the military dictatorship we were made all kinds of beautiful promises and we believed them, until we realized they were only promises.”¹⁰

⁸ Kurtz, Lester. “The Mothers of the Disappeared: Challenging the Junta in Argentina (1977-1983).”

Nonviolent-conflict.org. Published July 2010. 6-7.

⁹ Di Marco, Graciela. 95-109.

¹⁰ Di Marco, Graciela. 99.

Although some scholars argue that the mothers were focused on only seeking justice and answers for their missing children, others see the mothers as more than just a one-issue group, but truly a group devoted to human, civil and political rights beyond Argentina. Fernando Bosco studies Las Madres through networks and “emotional geographies.”¹¹ The organization of the mothers reflects the bonds they shared and “the crucial relation between social networks, emotions, and geography.” As mentioned earlier, critics called Las Madres “Las Locas”. This reflects the engrained patriarchal practice of “equating emotions with irrationality.”¹²

The Academy Award-winning film *La Historia Oficial* was the first to document the struggle of the disappeared and examines the illegal adoptions of children of the disappeared. Alicia and Roberto love their adopted daughter Gaby. Alicia finds out the circumstances behind Gaby’s adoption, which her husband hid from her. Alicia learns about the military regime’s human rights abuses in the process of trying to figure out her daughter’s history. Tensions between Alicia and Roberto rise as Alicia undergoes an awakening regarding her understanding of the injustices the military dictatorship committed. Catherine Leen attempts to find its central message through analyzing the dichotomy of Alicia’s luxurious home versus the raw city of Buenos Aires, she writes, “Although the luxury seen in Alicia’s home is a result of her husband Roberto’s dubious business dealings and close links with the military... outside the home Alicia

¹¹ Bosco, Fernando J. 344-346.

¹² Bosco, Fernando J. 345.

moves through a beautiful, tranquil city. Despite the disturbing turn that the film takes after Ana's revelation, which leads Alicia to reluctantly face the possibility that her adopted child, Gaby, is the daughter of a *desaparecida*, the film continues to offer solace to the viewer by focusing on the elite areas of the city."¹³ Alicia's husband would prefer her to stay within the domestic bounds of the home, but the city's romantic appeal and her search for answers about Gaby calls her outside.

Alicia starts off as a woman completely detached from the realities of the dictatorship and by the end of the film, her worldview shifts as she recognizes the struggle of the mothers and activists at the Plaza de Mayo. The ending of the film leaves the audience wondering what happened to Alicia and her family, but also leaves them with the understanding that Alicia has made a huge shift in consciousness. The historically constructed feminine dichotomy of the domestic and public life is in play here. In the film, it is clear that Alicia's husband faces no guilt regarding his actions, but for Alicia, she is disgusted and horrified when forced to face the reality of her situation. Women are central to the film, from Alicia to her friend Ana to Sara, the woman who might be Gaby's biological grandmother and a member of an organization like Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. This reflects that the second generation directors of these films were

¹³Leen, Catherine. "City of Fear: Reimagining Buenos Aires in Contemporary Argentine Cinema". *Bulletin of Latin American Research*. 27 no. 4 (2008). 468.

“attuned to the increasing visibility of organizations such as Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.”¹⁴

Feminism’s spread in Latin America took time due to the region’s deep ties to a masculine monoculture. Women were considered apolitical, except for situations that directly appealed to them as mothers.¹⁵ This falls within the schema that many members of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo explained their reasons to organize and work in political activism. The importance of motherhood within Latin American culture is emphasized, and motherhood was too emphasized by members of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Sara Eleanor Howe also considers the work of other scholarly work that question if the work of the Madres is truly taking the personal into the political. Howe addresses the obstacles women faced when organizing:

. . . a general tendency to regard any collective action involving numbers of women as a social rather than a political movement due to the fact that women were viewed by many as apolitical beings who were none the less permitted – to an extent – an interest in social issues as an extension of their mothering role” and “the rejection of feminist thought as a foreign, western doctrine, of little relevance to the Latin American situation, incompatible with traditional conservative values and at best a secondary consideration in the Marxist class struggle.”¹⁶

The Madres were a political group, but did not shy away from using their status as mothers to their advantage. It afforded them a sort of safety that other political

¹⁴ Garibotto, Verónica. “Iconic fictions: Narrating recent Argentine history in post 2000 second-generation films.” In *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*. (2011). 176.

¹⁵ Howe, Sara Eleanor. “The Madres de la plaza de mayo: asserting motherhood; rejecting feminism?” In *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 7, no.3 (2006). 43.

¹⁶ Howe, Sara Eleanor. 44.

activists in Argentina did not have during the military regime. It also helped that many of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo had limited (and most had none) experience in activist work. Asserting their status as mothers was as natural as actually being mothers. In interview with Nancy Saporta Sternbach and Zelia Brizeno, Hebe de Bonafini, the president of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, acknowledged her secondary status as a woman in her own home:

When my children were grown, I proposed the idea to my husband to do high school at the same time they did. But he refused. He was terribly sexist, a good person, but totally apolitical ... women were the consequences of their husbands: washing and ironing.¹⁷

The act of justifying political participation reflects on the historical disadvantage women have politically...for the women of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo to initially act, they had to connect it to their status as mothers. Without the motherhood security blanket, Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo would have undergone even more scrutiny, if for example, they were simply single, childless women organizing against the military regime because they disagreed with its practices and policies.

Sternbach and Brizeno's interview with de Bonafini shows the way the mothers socialized and politicized motherhood. Even though de Bonafini says she had a proclivity for activism from a young age, her status as a woman proved to make her activist work difficult.¹⁸ Scholars have suggested an expanded definition of motherhood as a way to amend the limited scope of the term, so that

¹⁷ Saporta Sternbach, Nancy, Zelia Brizeno, and Hebe de Bonafini. 17.

¹⁸ Saporta Sternbach, Nancy, Zelia Brizeno, and Hebe de Bonafini. 17.

it fully includes political activism as a characteristic in an “untouchable institution”.¹⁹ For de Bonafini, she rejected the feminist label, but asserted her independence and said Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo “defied what society told us to do.”²⁰

On the other hand, some women of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo did embrace feminism. In her interview, Nora Cortiñas explains that at first she thought feminism was “being against men” and “a synonym of lesbianism,” but later recognized that as a group, Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo included gender in their fight for justice, “simply by carrying out our endeavor as women”.²¹ Asserting a feminism that simply calls for equal rights to men worked for Cortiñas and surely other members of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo.

Now nearly 40 years after the women first organized, scholars have begun looking at the wider implications and intergroup intricacies of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Peluffo argues against the notion that the movement was monolithic, and addresses the various tensions within the women. While the act of searching for their children was not a political act, at least according to the mothers, their later actions in search of justice were. Scholars call the mothers’ work activism, but many of these women see their status as mothers the sole

¹⁹ Pieper Mooney, Jadwiga E. 986.

²⁰ Saporta Sternbach, Nancy, Zelia Brizeno, and Hebe de Bonafini. 20.

²¹ Di Marco, Graciela. 100.

reason for organizing.²²

U2 released the song “Mothers of the Disappeared” on their album *The Joshua Tree* (1988). Although this live performance of the song was in Chile during the band’s 1998 Popmart tour, the mothers on stage with U2 belonged to a human rights organization similar to Las Madres. U2’s singer Bono brought women to the stage holding photos of their loved ones who were disappeared. He calls Pinochet, the dictator of Chile from 1973 to 1990, directly: “I ask you, Mr. Pinochet, I ask you, tell these mothers where are there children. ..So Chile can say goodbye to the past. ... God is your judge,” and then sings the song “One.” Then, before singing “Mothers of the Disappeared,” the women onstage name their missing family members and information about them. Bono leads the crowd in a chant of “el pueblo vencerá,” (a people united will overcome) and the mothers again address the crowd. Bono then is handed the Chilean flag from someone in the crowd and places it on his microphone. The video ends with him holding hands with the women and they all take a bow as the music fades.²³ This emotional video gives a perspective to what outsiders thought about the disappeared—Bono wrote this song to bring attention to the disappeared to an international audience. Although the recognition from a global figure like Bono shows the disappeared groups did make significant progress in terms of getting

²² Peluffo, Ana. “The Boundaries of Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.” *A Contra corriente* 4, no. 2 (2007). 82.

²³ “U2 one + YouTube video, 7:28, posted by “SJGrantski,” December 29, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuFMoWV1cns>.

their cause out there, it is still worth noting that it is through a person who was not directly impacted by the abuses of a military regime. Bono transferred the mothers' message under the idea he was a champion of their cause.

Even today, women engaging in the political arena face intense criticism. Las Madres were widely discredited by the Argentine media and government. The archetype of the hysterical woman was employed to discredit their argument and organizing efforts. However, Las Madres by using their status as mothers to their advantage, the women gained international recognition and even won the United Nations Prize for Peace Education. The members of Las Madres recognized their situation did improve, "we now have a government that listens," Nora Cortiñas said in her interview.²⁴ Whether they adopted the feminist label or not, Las Madres worked tirelessly to work for the betterment of their society and accepted some basic feminist principles.

²⁴ Di Marco, Graciela. 99.