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Dehumanization and the Political Characterization of Left Wing Ideologies:

The "Medical Discourse" of the Argentinian Dictatorship during the "Dirty War"

> "When the social body of the country has been contaminated by disease which eats away at its entrails, it forms antibodies. These antibodies (death squads) cannot be considered in the same way as the microbes. As the government controls and destroys the guerrillas, the actions of the antibodies will disappear. This is already happening. It is only the reaction of a sick body" (Simpson and Bennett 1985: 82; qtd. in Suárez-Orozco).

The right wing military coup d'etat in Argentina that led to a vicious strong armed dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 was seen by many as the death of communism in 20th century Latin America (Suárez-Orozco 471). During the military regime, an ideological war manifested itself through state terrorism involving the torture and murder of dissenting Argentinians, or "subversives," known today as the 'Dirty War.' The militares' campaign left Argentinian civilians with a psychological trauma informed by fear of government that has lasted in various forms to this very day. During the dictatorship a dialogue was formed and characterized as "el discurso médico," translated literally as the "medical discourse," used by the government to describe marxist militants and civilians suspected of being leftists; this new language involved the government calling torture rooms "operating rooms" and literally referred to the leftists as a disease that needed to be surgically removed. By forcing the supposed "subversives" and their families into sickness roles, the government aimed to dehumanize the leftists by comparing them to an infection through the creation a medical metaphor focused on the excision of left-wing ideologies in Argentina and South America.

The medical discourse that was constructed aimed to capture marxists, communists, and other leftists under one single ideological umbrella, taking away any nuance in the discussion

and emphasizing that they were a disease infecting the social and political body of Argentina (Suárez-Orozco 489). The Argentine military perpetuated the concept that the leftists were "international, godless, and countryless," characterizing them as having been corrupted by foreign ideologies that effectively revoked their status as true Argentine civilians (Suárez-Orozco 483). The construction of this social metaphor compares leftists to infectious organisms that have been corrupted by outer forces. This metaphor gave justification to the soldiers who were ordered to kill their own countrymen by arguing that they were anti-argentine and that their continued existence was a threat to the stability and safety of the Argentine citizenry.

Further justification of state terrorism in the 'Dirty War' came from the Military's argument that action was required to "cleanse" the country of ideological impurities; "the killings were commonly referred to as 'cleanings'. . . 'we will clean you' was a common phrase out of the lips of torturers," thus the infection was not characterized as stemming originally from the leftists themselves, but rather from their "ideological contamination" (Suárez-Orozco 489). In this way, the dialogue puts a focus on communism as not only an infection, but a foreign agent attacking the body that is represented by Argentina. The rapid spread of this ideological contamination

Charles Rosenberg contemplates epidemic and endemic disease in his study discussing configuration and contamination: essentially, ideas revolving around illness were viewed either through the scope of an foreign, invasive, contaminating factor or that of an already existing factor in the environment that causes illness (Rosenberg 294-295). Rosenberg explains that both of these theories always exist in any discussion of disease, highlighting the biological "contact zone" while also emphasizing the environmental influences of illness in any population

(Rosenberg 296). In the case of the Argentine dictatorship, the medical metaphor of the medical discourse describes a situation that captures both the contaminant through foreign ideologies infecting their culture to create configuration through an environment that sustains sympathy toward leftist politics. A personification begins to form where Argentina becomes an infected body: the disease was leftism, and the cure was violence.

In a similar fashion to German military ideals, "the [Argentine] military has traditionally seen itself as an institution of superior men entrusted . . . to protect the 'fatherland' from foreign and . . . domestic enemies" (Suárez-Orozco 484). This influence was further perpetuated by the large influx of Nazi officers that fled to Argentina after World War II to escape persecution from the Allied powers, resulting in a political climate that could be directly influenced by Nazi philosophy. As described in "Sterilization and the Nazi Biomedical Vision," Nazi scientists claimed that genetic inferiority of gays, blacks, and Jews all led to a mutation and change in the genepool of the superior German *Volk,* with wide-ranging consequences that affected the wellbeing of Nazi Germany (Lifton 22-24). The Nazi-sympathizing Argentine military maintained a similar ideological view of inferiority connected to marxists and leftists contaminating the body politic of the country. However, in contrast to the Nazi Doctors' perception of imperfection within the public, the analogy presented by the military government put a specific onas on the ideology being an invasive disease as opposed to a direct mutation in the Argentine public.

Leftist ideology was separated from their physical, biological being, creating an characterization that can be examined through a reversal of Michel Foucault's understanding of

how societies developed understandings of disease. This theory, called “the clinical gaze” emphasizes the importance of analysing the smallest visible part of a being, its “irreducible quality”; however, the rhetorical strategy of the Argentine government takes the opposite stance to combat the spread of ideological and moral infection (Foucault xiv). In the case of the military regime, the ideological war raged on with a focus in removing the direct biological being of the leftists, instead focusing on the contamination as a macrosocial issue to be solved through purification of the body. Rather than aiming to reduce the issue to its most individual form, the government aimed to keep the battle as theoretical as possible, arguing that their goals contributed to the invasion of communism in the West (Suárez-Orozco 474)

The macrosocial understanding of the war against communism can be further informed by Arthur Kleinman’s definition of “sickness” in *The Illness Narratives.* Kleinman describes sickness as *“*the understanding of a disorder and its generic sense across a population in relation to macrosocial (economic, political, institutional) forces” (Kleinman 6). This understanding can be related to the dialogue of communism as a sickness that affects the population of Argentina as a whole, requiring a medical treatment of excision to maintain the moral and ideological health of the nation. Playing deeply into the rhetoric of the Argentine government that aimed to keep their real, vicious attacks on their people shrouded in a narrative of a war between communism and the West, the sickness narrative described by Kleinman puts the infection of the individual into a global, macrosocial context. The infection had spread, and only through forceful action could the government hope to cleanse the body politic before the disease took hold and ravaged South America.

As described in Roy Porter's "The Roots of Medicine," the process of an epidemic becoming endemic requires a disease that does not kill every host it acquires: a disease killing its host is a mistake, therefore an endemic disease is one that has learned how to survive within its host without killing it (Porter 25). All a disease requires to become endemic is hosts who become immune to it, passive carriers that can still spread the disease to new populations. In this metaphor, leftist ideology is considered to have been an epidemic that turned endemic; leftist ideologies had permeated the populace, spreading anti-nationalist, anti-christian fervor that infected and corrupted Argentine politics. The only way to treat Argentina's "inner decay" was through "radical surgical and hygienic intervention" to "cleanse" the "rotting and decomposition in the body politic" (Suárez-Orozco 489). According to the Argentine Military, "the enemy was not just the armed left but all ideological dissent," thus even left leaning civilians who were not part of marxist rebel groups were still considered to be active contaminators that must be purified in a "righteous, unconventional, [*dirty*] war" (Suárez-Orozco 483).

This dialogue served the political purpose of not only justifying the murder of leftists, but their families and friends as well. In several situations formal documentation of military operations led by the Argentinian government against civilians suspected of being involved in communist militant groups focused on cutting out the illness to ensure that it didn't spread to other civilians (Suárez-Orozco 484-485). The Governor of Buenos Aires during the dictatorship stated: "first we kill all the subversives; then we will kill their collaborators, then . . . their sympathizers, then . . . those who remain indifferent," effectively aiming to stem the spread of the ideological and metaphorical communist plague (Suárez-Orozco 485). The ethical

implications of these actions were justified by the medical discourse and its metaphor of a body plagued with harmful, invasive ideologies that threatened the body's life.

The government's personification of their country as a single human body, similar to the Nazi "fatherland," characterized socialists and communists as carriers of disease that made this body unwell. Within the ranks of the military a fear was perpetuated that "[a]n infection had penetrated and was growing throughout the 'fatherland,'" informing this "new inquisition" that leftism was a ideological pathogen corrupting the nation (Suárez-Orozco 489). Civilians who ascribed to leftist politics were not only dehumanized, they were specifically outcast until they were seen as nothing but foreign actors contaminating the body politic. In this way, the dialogue served to completely displace the desaparecidos by transferring them to internment camps, making their families and friends question their suspicions through falsified information and directly suppressing media coverage of the events that unfolded. Thus, the regime came to justify their violent policies and suppression of reporters and idealogues as an attempt to cure the country of its illness. By politicizing the left as an infection, the government was creating a reason to warrant their vicious attacks on the leftists before, during, and occasionally even after the regime fell.

Adhering to the metaphor of the "medical discourse," soldiers working for the dictatorship were able to more easily separate themselves from their actions; the dialogue served a dual purpose as both a justification for the military's actions to the public as well as to reassure the individual soldiers that they were acting in their own country's best interest. As mentioned in Perri Klass' "Learning the Language," medical jargon for doctors gives them a dual sensation of belonging in a community as well as desensitizing them to the extreme stress involved in

caretaking (Klass 73-75). In a similar way, the medical dialogue used by Argentine torturers could be associated with purposefully created detachment from their actions, referring to torture rooms as “operating rooms” and to torture as a hygienic necessity rather than truly admitting to their actions (Suárez-Orozco 489-490).

Furthermore, the role of actual medical professionals serving the right wing dictatorship further informed how the medical discourse created a new perception of what is “just” when handling prisoners. “Military and police physician[s] would come in” while torturers were with a “patient” in order to “take their vital signs and proceed to tell the torturers whether to continue torturing” to ensure that they wouldn’t die, but would live in traumatized fear of the government (Suárez-Orozco 489). The language utterly dehumanized leftist prisoners, an important and extremely necessary precaution taken by the government considering the soldiers and the detainees were mostly around the same age and from the same cities, potentially making it much more difficult to commit the atrocities the government deemed necessary to stem leftist ideologies in Argentina. The particular use of the “picana,” or cattle prod as a torturing tool to shock and brutalize prisoners further contributed to the utter dehumanized status of the communist and civilian prisoners. The medical discourse and the actual items used to torture the subversives clearly aimed to dehumanize communists and marxists by creating a particular context of leftism as pathological enemy and a hygienic imperfection.

These methods of prolonging torture and spreading terror created what was described by Juan Carlos Kusnetzoff as a “percepticide” in which “the perceptual organs . . . became a casuality of the engulfing terror” (Kusnetzoff 95-114) leading to a sensory-dead society that could not contemplate the very real actions of the government. The denial of the vast majority of

the Argentinian public to believe that the government could commit such atrocities resulted in a negation of the suffering and even humanity of the so-called subversives not only by the military regime but by the people as well. This led to a vicious cycle in which the people lived either in indifference, ignorance, or fear, and the state could continue its activities largely unhindered by the general public. In fact, according to Suárez-Orozco, there is evidence to suggest that the "initial military operation against the armed [marxist] guerrillas was very successful . . . [y]et the state controlled terror continued for years, now haunting largely innocent civilians and even children" (Suárez-Orozco 485). Therefore, even after the initial threat was quelled, the state continued its policy of spreading terror through the populace not only as a method of stemming leftist ideology but for convenience and unquestionable control as well.

The lack of information and constant fear of further violence sat heavy on the families of the desaparecidos as well as the confused and semi-ignorant population; the survivors who knew the truth of the regime were forced into a sickness role in which the government infantilized them through fear. Roy Porter says "[i]llness is thus not just biological but social," describing sickness roles as understandings of disease through the lens of "nature and culture" informed by factors such as "class, gender," and "conventions from community to community" (Porter 35-36). The sickness role created by the government was one of pity and disgust, not only did they other the leftists to the point that their humanity was taken from them, they also created an understanding that their families were a threat as well.

Although impossible to wipe out the entire lineage of each desaparecido, as the militares might have hoped, it was possible to create a culture of intense fear and silence. By creating a climate in which political allegiance could result in the death of oneself one's children, and one's

entire immediate family, civilians were denied the right to feel or think independently without living in fear, in a position of total helplessness as the majority of Argentines during the time period had no idea the extent of the government's violence toward its own people resulting in more than 10,000 murders and 30,000 disappearances where the victim is assumed to be dead.

The final and perhaps most unique action of the Argentine military regime was the relocation of the children of leftists. Current estimates state that roughly 3% of the imprisoned women civilians that were 'disappeared' by the military regime were pregnant at the time of their capture, and several female prisoners were believed to have been raped and forced to bear the child of a militar (Goldman). That child would then be taken away and the mother would be drugged and thrown from an airplane into the Río de la Plata to drown (Goldman). "As many as five hundred newborns and young children were taken from disappeared parents," given to childless military, police, and politically favored families (Goldman). This displacement is still being rectified today, a lasting imprint of the horror of the dictatorship, and is a testament to the "paranoid ethos" and fear of "contamination" within the fatherland. By removing children from their mothers, the government not only perpetuated terror, they also further solidified their medical metaphor that leftism, not the leftists, is the plague: with the transfer of a child from an infected environment into sterilized one, the ideological ailment could never befall the newborn and the country could remain pure.

This action by the Argentine government draws one last disturbing connection between itself and the Nazi German state. As was planned by the Nazi Doctors such as Mendel and Lenz, a focus on eugenics and the sterilization of the genetically inferior was the only way to preserve the *Volk* (Lifton 24-25). Hitler, agreeing with this theory, wished to create a "state mediated race"

of Germans without any racial, religious, or ideological imperfections (Lifton 24). Suárez-Orozco defined a similar element in the Argentine military response to leftism: “the castration metaphor is unmistakable,” alluding to the rape and targeted torture of female prisoners’ genitalia as part of their attempt to create “docile, de-sexualized, infantile and obedient subjects” (Suárez-Orozco 487). Both the literal action of torture and murder, as well as the theft of children, adds a final, sexual connotation to the spread of ideological impurity and further infantilizes survivors and their families alike.

The medical discourse in Argentina was shrouded in metaphorical connotations of an impure and contaminated social and political environment that was harmful to the Argentine ‘fatherland,’ informed by their admiration of Nazi German concepts of a clean society. The actions of this government left 30,000 civilians missing, nearly 10,000 confirmed state sponsored killings, and thousands more tortured citizens all harboring and spreading immense fear of the government even after the return to democracy in 1983. “The campaign of terror was carefully planned from the top down” to shape a passive, ignorant state through a percepticide in which the truth was persecuted by the general public and fear remained rampant in the families of the leftists (Suárez-Orozco 487). Ultimately, the medical discourse can be related not just to a metaphor of contamination of the body politic, but also the terror that is “if not quite endemic” then “an epidemic in South America” long after the right wing military regimes had fallen (Suárez-Orozco 476).

The creation of a medical metaphor served several purposes for the Argentine military regime to justify its actions, empower its soldiers torturers, and dehumanize the left. A personified Argentine body politic contaminated with a foreign ideological infection required a

Dirty War to purify the nation. The metaphor of excision, to surgically remove the affected cells that were the leftists, further informs the justification of drastic measures to ensure the health and safety of their homeland. Creating the ‘medical discourse’ served as invaluable tool to separate the government from its actions on both a physical level, through permitting torture and murder, and on a macrosocial level through the emphasis on the greater stakes of this ideological war. Through these actions, the government perpetuated a climate of fear leading to ignorance and ‘percepticide’ in the body politic, allowing their regime to continue for more than seven bloody years.

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