

Lessons of the Past

The Caravan of Death and the Value of Memory

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Introduction:

Few people exemplify the importance of memory in the way that investigative journalist, Patricia Verdugo, did, particularly as it relates to the issue of the so-called Caravan of Death. Verdugo was a Chilean political activist and writer who was affected in a deeply personal way by the Pinochet dictatorship which assumed power of the Chilean government beginning in the 1970s. Her own father was kidnapped and murdered by government forces which proceeded to discard his body in a river and deny any involvement after the fact. This incident was fundamental in driving her lifelong quest of uncovering the misdeeds of the Pinochet regime and giving a voice to those who had been silenced by the military dictatorship. Her relentless efforts bore ten books, including *Bucarest 187* and *Los zarpazos del puma*, the latter of which is often considered a key piece of evidence in the proceedings against General Augusto Pinochet and his associates. Thus, through her actions, we see an example of the importance of memory as it relates to the disappeared and the administration of justice.

The goal of this research paper is to analyze the events of the 1973 military coup in Chile and the aftermath thereof, specifically as it relates to the issue of the disappeared and the Caravan of Death. Through this analysis, I will argue for the importance of preserving the memory of the people who were tortured, killed, and ‘disappeared’ during this period. Despite the pain and suffering that might make the events something that most would prefer to forget, it is vital that these stories are not forgotten because of the valuable lessons that they offer for the future. Without the past to guide us, we are much more likely to repeat the mistakes that lead to horrors such as the Caravan. This was something which Patricia Verdugo understood, and it is something which others must learn in order for justice to be achieved for the disappeared and their families, especially in the face of modern suppression.

History:

The origins of Chile's disappeared lie with the military coup d'état of 1973, during which the military took advantage of political tensions between socialist president, Salvador Allende, and the opposition party in congress, in order to overthrow the existing democratic framework and replace it with a military dictatorship. Furthermore, Pinochet and his associates exploited the wider political rivalry between the United States and the USSR as a result of the Cold War, gaining US support for the coup and the resultant regime because of the socialist leanings of President Allende. Following this coup, a military death squad was formed under the command of General Sergio Arellano Stark, for the purpose of sweeping over Chile, from north to south, and rooting out support for the defunct presidency as well as pushing down potential resistance by frightening the populace into compliance. This death squad, which came to be known as the Caravan of Death, was held responsible for the deaths of at least 97 people, according to the NGO *Memoria y Justicia* (Ewel).

Unfortunately, due to the circumstances surrounding these extrajudicial killings and the subsequent disposal of these military prisoners, the exact numbers are difficult to determine. It is these circumstances which give rise to the issue of the disappeared, a term which refers to those people who were secretly imprisoned and presumably killed by the government during political suppression in Latin America between the 1960s and 1990s. The fact that the government killed these prisoners and disposed of their bodies while assuming a policy of denying any involvement with their disappearances has made it impossible to clearly determine how many or who they killed, leaving families without justice or closure. Although the government tried to frame its actions during and after the coup d'état as justified or self-defense against some great leftist

conspiracy, the fact of the matter is, these actions were about suppressing and taming the people of Chile through a campaign of extrajudicial killings and sheer terror.

Honoring the Memory of the Disappeared:

The families of the disappeared of Chile and other Latin American countries have kept and honored the memory of their loved ones in several different ways, ranging from formal protest gatherings to somewhat more subtle forms of dissent like the production of art work depicting the suffering caused by the regime. These demonstrations, often led by the spouses, parents, siblings, and children of the disappeared, were often considered to be dangerous undertakings because of the risk of government retaliation under the oppressive regimes of the 1960s into the 1990s. Even so, the desperate need for justice and closure made these protests relatively commonplace during and after the military dictatorship. One of the unique forms of protest art which emerged from Chile were the arpilleras, patchwork pictures created by the impoverished women of the country, especially those whose husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers had been imprisoned or killed by the Pinochet regime. These works of art display scenes of their suffering from the hardships of hunger, poverty, and fear which they faced on a daily basis living under the Pinochet dictatorship, as well as their deep sorrow at the loss of their loved ones. Families of the disappeared express themselves through other artistic media as well, including murals, graffiti, and traditional representations such as paintings and poetry.

Active protests and vigils are also common incarnations of the powerful emotions of those whose loved ones were taken for them by the oppressive governments of Latin America during the period from the 1960s through the 1990s. One of the most famous groups of protestors which operates this way is the madres de la plaza de mayo, an Argentine organization of mothers who march in front of the presidential palace, seeking answers regarding the

disappearance of their children. While this is the most well-known group of protestors, many similar protests regularly occur in Chile, as well as other Latin American countries with similar past experiences. These demonstrations are normally characterized by marchers who carry signs asking for justice for the disappeared or displaying images of loved ones who were “disappeared” by the government. Other, more individual forms of protests exist as well, such as women who have spent years dancing la cueca, a traditional Chilean partner dance, alone as a demonstration against the loss of their husbands.

Threats to the Memory of the Disappeared:

The major threats to the preservation of the memory of the disappeared are government and societal suppression, the passage of time, and, to some degree, eurocentrism. While it is difficult to definitively judge whether the number of protests and vigils has lessened over the years, it is safe to say that there is significant resistance to them from governmental and societal forces. Some of this suppression is understandable in a society which is desperately trying to heal the wounds of a painful time in their nation’s history, and an increasing number of protests over the years have become quite a bit more violent as the so-called “fearless generation” (Cummings) has taken over more control from the previous generation which grew up during the Pinochet dictatorship. The reasons why this new generation is more prone to rioting is not entirely clear, though most observers speculate that it has something to do with a lack of fear of disproportionate government retaliation or the fact that the previous generation has experienced enough violence that they do not desire to contribute to more of it.

In connection with this generational gap, we see that the influence of the passage of time has proven to be one of the more difficult enemies of the protest movements honoring the disappeared. This is mostly due to the fact that as time goes on, the families of the disappeared

age and pass on. Patricia Verdugo provides a fair example of this terrible difficulty which faces those seeking to preserve the memory of the disappeared with her death in 2008. Simply by her passing away, a major voice for the movement searching for answers and justice for the disappeared was wiped out. The progression of time has made it so that those who are most eager to know the truth have significantly decreased over time, not through any fault of their own or an active decision to halt their protests, but because they are unable to live forever.

Arguably, eurocentrism also poses a threat to the successful preservation of the memory of the disappeared in Latin America for two reasons. First, because there is much greater focus on incidents involving the deaths of citizens of European countries or the United States, as is the case with tragedies such as the Holocaust, there is less attention paid to similar tragedies like the large-scale “disappearances” of the people of Latin American countries. Secondly, due to the detrimental involvement of the United States in the situation, it is likely that the US and many other outsiders would prefer to act as though the horrors of the Pinochet regime and other Latin American dictatorships which they contributed to and propped up never happened. This reason is perhaps the most debatable of the three, but it offers further perspective on why the passage of time and governmental and societal pressures have been allowed to suppress the memory of the disappeared in the way that they have, with so little resistance.

Importance of Preserving the Memory of the Disappeared:

There are several layers of importance to continuing to hold onto the memory of the disappeared, even if there is no guarantee that there will ever be a complete resolution. The primary components of this importance include the political, cultural, and spiritual importance. Categorized another way, these components can be simply stated as a need for justice and a need for closure. These various aspects make it vitally important for the protests and demonstrations

in honor of the disappeared to continue on until they can be satisfied for the sake of the disappeared and their families.

Culturally and spiritually, the search for answers is simply the families asking for the peace of closure and the possibility of having the bodies of their loved ones returned for burial. As in the majority of cultures, for most Chileans, there is a certain comfort which can be taken from knowing that your loved ones have been properly taken care of, even in death. Therefore, the families of the disappeared are hopeful that they will be able to have their family members' bodies returned to them so that they may properly bury them according to their traditional burial rites and practices. Furthermore, as a cultural phenomenon, the disappeared are a fundamental part of the history of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and a great number of other Latin American countries. They are interwoven into the culture and choosing not to acknowledge this aspect of their cultures and histories will end up creating greater tension because of the way that it fails to repair the old wounds inflicted by past trauma, instead throwing a cover over it and hoping for the best.

Politically, these protests represent a wider need for justice in the wake of the devastation wrought by the Pinochet regime, as well as other dictatorships in South America. While the people of Chile were fortunate enough that the leaders of the oppressive regime which ruled over their country for decades were actually prosecuted for their crimes, the citizens of many Latin American countries are not nearly as lucky, and even within Chile the punishment was arguably not severe enough to fit the crime. Therefore, how are the people of these countries to achieve justice when oftentimes they are left in a situation where there are few people left to be held accountable for the crimes committed against them and their families. In such a situation, it seems that the best alternative is to find a way to restore as much dignity as they possibly can to

the victims and their families by providing them with answers and giving them with a chance to have their story known and told.

Conclusion:

We can support the continued remembrance of the disappeared by continuing the work of their loved ones, calling for answers and not letting others forget simply because it is an inconvenient truth. It may not be pleasant to think about or dwell on, but those who were lost deserve justice, and their families deserve closure. Thus, we need to do everything that we can to achieve that end. Some of the best groups and organizations to provide aid to in order to show support of the cause of the disappeared include The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Derechos Chile, Agrupacion de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, independent filmmakers who create documentaries about the issue, and humanitarian organizations like Pro-Busqueda and the UNHCR.

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