

Desire in everyday life: the Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo*

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There have been many instances of resolute desires, but very few of the kind that has animated a few women from Argentina to refuse to accept that the *desaparecidos* should also disappear from the pages of history.



Our theme of this year is: *Desire in the clinic and in everyday life*. So far we have had very few contributions concerning desire in everyday life; most papers and presentations have been on desire and related matters as they appear in the clinical experience, although it can be argued that those manifestations somehow reflect desire in everyday living. Besides, it is with caution that a psychoanalyst must approach events that occur outside the parameters of the psychoanalytic discourse. But psychoanalytic research cannot be confined — it has never been — to the clinical experience, since there exist outside that experience realities that are instructive to the psychoanalyst and which might be perceived in a different light through the application of psychoanalytic concepts and methodology.

The events that have inspired this paper are by now known around the world, even if only in summary form. They have affected some of us in a direct and personal way. By ‘some of us’ I mean the Argentines who lived in the Argentine Republic in the second part of the twentieth century. Between 1976 and 1978 two and a half million Argentines were forced to leave their country and go into exile to other countries in the Americas, Europe and Oceania. This was the consequence of the political and social persecution implemented by the military government that illegally (through a *coup d'état*) replaced the democratically elected government on the 24th of March, 1976. The persecution adopted the form of a ‘dirty war’ (to use the expression coined by one of the leaders of the military dictatorship) — a dirty way that was indeed very dirty, as it included all kinds of atrocity known in the history of human atrocities: assassination, torture, illegal detention, theft of all the possessions of the victims, the disappearance of citizens (who in most cases were murdered) and the theft of babies from their mothers, who gave birth in clandestine prisons — the mothers were then killed and became part of the long list of *desaparecidos*. The term *desaparecidos* (‘the ones that disappeared’) was

coined by the military, and used euphemistically to designate the predominantly young people who resisted the régime and other people who were only marginally connected with the resistance, or not connected at all, but who had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or of being somehow connected to people regarded as enemies by the military government. The *desaparecidos* were detained by secret police or the intelligence agents of the three armed forces and imprisoned in secret buildings (most of them, it was discovered later, belonging to the police, the Army, the Navy or the Air Force), without any access to legal aid or to their families (who did not know about their whereabouts), and without being submitted to any legal process. As soon as the military took control of the government, martial law was imposed, which meant the suspension of constitutional rights, the setting up of military courts to deal with what were considered as crimes against the State, summary trials and the application of severe prison sentences or the death penalty (which had been abolished in Argentina since the 1920s). But the military government did not implement the military law, which after all is a version of the law. They opted for eliminating the resistant opposition outside the law — for the sake of expediency, they later said. People were arrested usually in the middle of the night, under the cover of darkness, in secret operations — so that the media, which was under military control anyway, did not know anything about what was happening, except for the rumors that circulated from time to time. As the relatives and friends of those who were arrested went to police and military stations to enquire about them, they were told that nobody knew anything, that they must have disappeared. Their disappearance was, the dictators insisted, a trick that the subversive, criminal elements that resisted the military government used to continue their work of sedition underground, creating unnecessary anxiety among their families and friends. Those arrested did not return, and it was not until years later that concealed mass graves were discovered, although some corpses appeared earlier in the shores of neighbouring Uruguay. Those were the bodies of prisoners that had been dropped from airplanes at high altitude over the Atlantic Ocean or the *Río de la Plata* (the ‘River Plate’).

If you are in Buenos Aires and visit the *Plaza de Mayo* (‘May Square’), the historical city square surrounded by the government house (the *Casa Rosada*, or ‘Pink House’), the Cathedral, the Reserve Bank and the Cabildo, the old building that was the site of the government in colonial times, and if it happens to be a Thursday afternoon, starting at 3.30pm, you will see a group of women, mainly elderly women now, their heads covered by the white kerchiefs that have become their emblem. They walk in front

of the Pink House, around a pyramid that is the monument to the Argentinian flag, close to the statue of General Belgrano, one of the founding fathers of the nation and a hero of the war of independence. They walk mostly in silence. They have walked there, forming a circle, every Thursday afternoon, without missing one, for the last thirty-seven years, since the 30th of April of 1977, that is, a year after the *coup d'état* that imposed a military government for seven years.

To have walked every Thursday afternoon over those seven oppressive years required courage: all the mothers and their families were threatened with death; some were arrested; their homes and the premises of their organisation were frequently raided by security agents; they were infiltrated by agents of the secret services. They did not stop, and have not stopped to this day, and have continued after the restoration of democracy in 1983, they have declared, because their objective, namely, the re-appearance of *all* the disappeared, has not been achieved yet. Some thirty thousand people disappeared. The bodies of many of them have now appeared, their identity having been established by forensic investigations, as they were discovered years after their assassination. But there are quite a few who are still missing, and The Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo* refuse to accept that they must be regarded as dead by now.

I must abbreviate now, and in a few words give an idea of the workings of a desire, an individual and a collective desire, a very special version of the mother's desire, over the last thirty-seven years.

They were only fourteen when they started. By now they are hundreds, and thousands who are not mothers of disappeared people have worked with them. They have established branches, or promoted the creation of similar organisations, in other cities of Argentina and in other countries. They have obtained recognition from the Argentinian government and from national and international organisations that deal with violations of human rights. They have received many international awards for their work, and have been nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize. They have employed lawyers and scientists and created teams and institutions to find those who are still missing and for the investigation of the crimes of the dictatorship and the prosecution of murderers and torturers. They have created a university (the Popular University of the Mothers of *Plaza de Mayo*), publications, and websites. They have not only walked around the pyramid: they have not stopped working for their cause one single day. One day they marched around the pyramid for twenty-four hours. They also went through internal dissensions and trouble, and today there are two organisations of Mothers. Any

Argentine would regard this split as inevitable, almost obligatory in any respectable institution of the Republic.

For quite some time they had to face, with some honorable exceptions, the indifference of politicians, the churches, foreign governments and fellow Argentinians who did not support them because of fear or because they simply could not believe the magnitude of the atrocities and cruelty in a country that, for all its turbulent history, has a tradition of democratic and republican institutions and human relations. In 1978, the Mothers got some help from an event largely external to political life and human rights. Two years after the coup d'état, Argentina held the soccer World Cup. Thousands of journalists spent a few weeks in Buenos Aires and other cities of Argentina. The Mothers and others spoke to them about the persecution and the *desaparecidos*. The international bodies and forums on human rights started to listen. Delegates of the Mothers went to the Vatican and other cities and spoke to representatives of foreign governments. Those presentations had some effect; not as much as one would have hoped.

From The Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo* a section was born, rather informally at first, but then as a separate institution: the *Abuelas* ('Grandmothers') *de Plaza de Mayo* (who were only thirteen initially), the mothers of disappeared young women who were pregnant when abducted or became pregnant in prison, whose babies were stolen from them, and were soon after killed. The babies were given in adoption to members of the defence forces or families regarded as 'decent'. Later on it became apparent that most of those adoptions were guided by the ideological aim of saving those babies, of making them the children of good people, and liberating them from parents who were immoral terrorists who would bring them up as terrorists. Some of the officers and secret agents who, many years later, were tried by courts of law were charged with genocide, as their purpose was the elimination of a whole class of people, defined as terrorists of Marxist, anarchist or other subversive ideologies whose sinister design was the destruction of a traditionally established and the only ethically acceptable way of life. It is true that there were some terrorists among the disappeared. The majority, however, were political militants of the left and of other orientations; scientists, academics and professionals who were not politically active but were regarded as dangerous by the régime; workers and students of all extractions; Catholic and Protestant priests and nuns; some psychoanalysts, and quite a few analysts. Those involved in illegal activities could have been tried and sent to prison under the law. But the military were convinced that they were capable of administering the law better than the courts and the code of criminal law.

The perseverance, courage and extraordinary working capacity of the Mothers and Grandmothers had its fruits: many disappeared have reappeared — thousands of them, but there are still thousands missing. The Grandmothers have been able to identify more than a hundred children who were stolen by the secret services, and some of them have returned to their original families. But there are around 400 still missing. Only a few days ago the grandson of the President of the Grandmothers met her — he is now 37 years of age. Tragedies have resulted from the discovery of some of the stolen children, as these children, now adults, have been happy with the families that adopted them, and refused to have anything to do with their families of origin or the Grandmothers of the *Plaza de Mayo*. A few adoptive parents also experienced cruel tragedies, as they did not know the origin of the children they had adopted. There have been many public and private debates about the unintended cruel effect for some of the Grandmothers' quest, which otherwise has had the support of everybody except a few recalcitrant fascists.

Jacques Lacan referred to some desires as being 'resolute', and expressed his wish that the analysts he trained would be animated by a resolute desire (Lacan 1967–68). In his Seminar XVI, *From an Other to the other*, he refers to desire as Freud conceived of it (Lacan 1968–69). Lacan speaks then of an 'impassible' (or 'impassive') desire to translate the German *unzerstörbaren Wunsch*, which James Strachey translated as 'indestructible wish'. Impassible: 'incapable of suffering pain' or 'harm'; impassive: 'incapable of emotion'. Both terms apply aptly to what can be constructed as the desire of the Mothers and Grandmother of the *Plaza de Mayo*. If in their commitment they evoke Antigone and the evangelism of the saints, their effort to be efficacious and to bring life to what was a terrible legacy of death and destruction makes them the most accomplished modern version of motherhood.

During those dark years, a few steps from those mothers that never lost hope, in the Pink House, and in many other places, were the murderers that represent the darkest chapter of Argentine history. If psychoanalysis has shown like no other discipline or practice the creative power of desire in human life, it has also alerted us to the fact that desire can serve the most sinister projects. For in my view those military monsters that destroyed so much of the life of an entire nation were also animated by desire, a desire aligned with what Lacan once called 'a dark God'. They were committed to a cause, and they worked day and night towards its realisation, like the mothers and grandmothers in the Plaza.

Since its inception psychoanalysis has known and has worked with desire mostly in its pathological deviations, within the relatively safe confines of the consulting room. It is outside the analytic room that desire shows all its faces, real faces, faces in the real, some of which are ugly and others beautiful beyond belief.

Lacan, J. (1967–68) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XV, The Psychoanalytic Act*. Trans C. Gallagher. Unpublished manuscript.

Lacan, J. (1968–69) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVI, From an Other to the other*. Trans. C. Gallagher. Unpublished manuscript.