



# **Panel “Reflecting on the Disappearance of Siblings . . . The Biographical Family Archive Project of *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo*” and the Neoliberal Agenda, at the VI World Social Forum of Caracas, Venezuela, 2006**

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## **Abstract**

This report discusses one of the VI World Social Forum workshops titled “Reflecting on experiencing the disappearance of siblings, and the effects of participating in the Biographical Family Archive Project of *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo*,” and relates this workshop to the mandate of the World Social Forum as a whole. As part of the World Social Forum, this workshop opposed neoliberalism and stressed the importance of building a society centred on the human person. The stories of workshop participants achieve several things: they allow connections to be made between a variety of repressive projects and the neoliberal agenda; they document hitherto unheard stories, to retrace the horrifying events and the historical trauma of communities; they rewrite conventional historiography; and they contribute to efforts to bring perpetrators to justice. These stories also bring to light Latin America’s emergence into global capitalism as a story of violence and destruction that originated in the economic interests of the United States.

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The emergence of Latin America into global capitalism at the beginning of the 1970s was expressed through the implementation of the neoliberal agenda, now called 'globalization'. To implement the agenda the U.S overthrew so-called populist civilian-military governments and built military dictatorships in Chile and Bolivia in 1973, in Uruguay in 1974, in Argentina in 1975, in Peru in 1976, and later in other Latin American countries, and controlled the entire region. The special strategies of neoliberal economic development were, in the 1970s, the commodification and privatization of land through the active eviction of peasants and indigenous populations; in the 1980s, the conversion of collective and national property into private property rights through debt; and in the 1990s, the commodification of feminized labor, management and conservation of the planet through corporate globalization. In this social environment military dictatorships inaugurated disappearances and killings as a means of securing the success of the neoliberal program. It was in this recent historical context that Venezuela hosted the VI World Social Forum in 2006.

What is the World Social Forum? It is not an organization, nor a united front platform, but

an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a society centred on the human person. (From the WSF Charter of Principles)<sup>2</sup>

The Social Forum's main commitment is to expose the distinctive features of the neoliberal state that are threatening the health of people and the planet. What are the basic assumptions of the neoliberal state? The economic components are expressed in the following policies:

1. a shift from growing diverse food crops for domestic consumption to specializing in the production of cash crops or other commodities for export, such as coffee, copper, etc.;
2. abolishing food and agricultural subsidies to reduce government expenditures;
3. deep cuts to social programs, usually in the areas of education, health, and housing, as well as massive layoffs in the civil service;
4. currency devaluation measures that increase import costs while reducing the value of domestically produced goods;

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wsfindia.org/>

5. liberalization of trade and investment and high interest rates to attract foreign investment;
6. privatization of government-held enterprises (Roddick, 1988).

The transnational elite calls this economic process “democracy,” although it has no democratic content. The cultural/ideological component is consumerism and cutthroat individualism, even though induced wants will never be met for the vast majority of humanity. Agents of this process are transnational capital organized institutionally in global corporations, and in supranational economic planning agencies (G-7/G-8, IMF, WB, WTO). These agents impose the West’s industrial and economic systems on colonial countries to maintain them as suppliers of cheap raw material, exploitable labour and market sinks for their finished products.

At the WSF program in Caracas-Venezuela, from January 24 to 29, was organized around the following themes:

1. **Communication, cultures and education.** Democratizing dynamics and alternatives; defending public means of communication...
2. **Diversities, identities and cosmovisions in our movement.** Racism and colonialism; gender identities and sexual diversity; Latin American and regional identities; youth culture...
3. **Imperial strategies and the resistance of the people.** Neoliberal war and imperial order; terrorism and the rise of the culture of fear; military occupation and impunity in Latin America and the Caribbean; commercialization of life and institutional instruments; free trade agreements; foreign debt...
4. **Power, politics and the fight for social emancipation.** Struggles against neoliberal capitalism; social practices of resistance; solidarity movements and new internationalism; feminisms’ struggles against patriarchy, domination and violence; the struggles and political projects of indigenous peoples; youth struggles; social transformation...
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6. **Work, exploitation and life reproduction.** Impoverishment, inequality and poverty in the North and the South; gender inequality; struggles of workers’ unions and social organizations; migrations and new forms of exploitation; child work...

One central aspect in the Social Forum in Caracas was the reconstruction of memory in the region, by telling the stories of the disappeared. These stories allow connections to be made between a variety of repressive projects and the neoliberal agenda; they document previously unheard stories, retrace the horrifying events and the historical trauma of communities; they rewrite conventional historiography; and they contribute to efforts to bring perpetrators to justice. Moreover, they bring to light 50 years of US foreign policy in the region that installed military dictatorships, violators of human rights, and trained torturers in the School of the Americas, or as it is known to many, “America’s School of Assassins.”<sup>3</sup>

Those who go to this kind of gathering for the first time confront every day the daunting decision of what to attend among the 180 sessions. I attended three workshops a day for four days. Here I will talk about one workshop that had a great impact on me. It was the session “Reflecting on experiencing the disappearance of siblings, and the effects of participating in the Biographical Family Archive Project of *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo*.” This panel was organized by Cristina Bettanin and Horacio Pietragalla. The focus of the panel was Argentina, where between 1975 and 1983 more than 30,000 Argentineans were killed or disappeared. According to *Comisión Nacional de Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP) among the disappeared 67% were men and 33% were women. The “Argentinean method”, as it is known in the region, involved the disappearance of an opponent, systematic torture in jails and in clandestine torture centres, and the kidnapping of babies. Around 480 babies born to pregnant prisoners were kidnapped from their mothers and offered for adoption to military personnel or others.

Panelists described how resistance against the dictatorship was organized on various fronts, from unions to social organizations. However, the battlefronts organized by the families of the disappeared were central to the struggle. The recurring use of terror damaged almost every community in Argentina except organizations such as “Families of Detained and Disappeared for Political Reasons” and “Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.” Mothers and grandmothers confronted government crimes by asserting their moral right as life givers, as mothers. They resisted the abuse of the military dictatorship by challenging the terrorist state of Argentina in a variety of ways. Most famously, The Mothers of the Disappeared staged weekly protests in front of the government palace in Buenos Aires. These protests drew thousands of people as well as international attention. The mothers endured various kinds of aggression. In December 1977, 12 mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, representing relatives of the thousands of disappeared, were kidnapped by the government. In January 1978 the bodies of seven of these women were washed onto a beach in southern Argentina. In 1995 an ex-navy captain, Alfredo Astiz, confessed that

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=100>

“Between 15 and 20 prisoners, weekly, were injected with Pentothal and put on planes and thrown out into the Rio de la Plata. As an officer, my task was to take the clothes off the bodies before throwing them out of the plane. These flights occurred weekly from 1976 to 1977, and around 2,000 humans were killed. After the work was done, the naval priest who justified the killings, citing the parable of the wheat and the chaff, comforted us. In that parable, the chaff is burned to save the wheat, implying that the political prisoners must be burned to save the Argentinean people from the communist influence.” (Sabanés, 1995: 19).

In this way, three generations were victimized: grandparents, parents and children.

Through 30 years of struggle, mothers and grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo transformed the identity of the country and their own identity. Argentinean society has finally come to support the political identity that mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo won in the memory of their children. From being mothers and grandmothers of subversives, as the government propaganda portrayed their children, they are now recognized as the mothers and grandmothers of those who struggled for social justice. These women also have changed locations; from being housewives they inserted themselves as subjects of history claiming the role of witnesses and recorders of events that were denied officially and socially (Sternback 1991:94 cited in Radcliffe 1993). By doing that, this generation of women changed traditional family models and wider socio-political power relations in their country. This view is challenged by Radcliffe (1993), who argues that perpetuating the gendered stereotypes of motherhood and women as life givers reinforces patriarchal hierarchies, as these women did not generally voice any gender issues such as divisions of domestic labour, or male violence against women (1993:110). Nevertheless, in the context of surviving in Latin America, the family was an important source of resistance and served as a protection against genocide.

The panel’s main focus was the Family Biographical Archive. Using qualitative methods, researchers interviewed 1,700 family members, classmates, and neighbours of the disappeared. The aim was to reconstruct the identity of the disappeared and to give psychological support to family members. Interviewed participants were asked to talk about how the disappearance of a family member had affected their daily lives, their histories, their memories, and the entire dynamic of their lives. The project built memories of the disappeared for their children, who are now between 25 and 30 years old. Of the 480 children who were born in prison, and latter adopted, only 84 have been restored to their natural families. The remaining ones continue to be estranged from their natural families and family history.

Horacio, one of the panelists, presented his testimony.<sup>4</sup> He is a 28-year old man. He was born in prison and given in adoption to a military family. He recalled knowing even as a toddler that he did not belong to the family in which he was raised, because he rejected the woman who supposedly was his mother. When growing up, he saw himself different physically from the other members of this “family.” He remembered being disturbed by the campaign “Do not live in doubt” initiated by the mothers and grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. When The National Commission for the Right to Identity opened services to test DNA, he decided to face his doubt. Five years ago, Horacio tested his DNA to verify his family links. Once his identity was discovered, he got from the mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo a Family Biographical Archive book.

The Family Biographical Archive is a project organized by Universidad de Buenos Aires. It is a collection of books in which family members, friends, classmates, and neighbours of disappeared persons reconstruct their memories of the disappeared through interviews and pictures. These books are then given to newly identified children. In this way, Horacio has been slowly learning about his parents, who they were, and what they enjoyed. The archive helped him to create a mental image of his parents. After this first step, he investigated how they died. He said, “The archives were not enough to cure the empty hole in my soul because I had never touched them.” What is worse, he said, “My grandmother died 2 years before I was identified. She was the last member of my family. Now, I have been adopted by all the mothers and grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.”

Panellists argued that testimonies have altered the conditions for recovery, making them more favourable for both the individual and the community at large. Under conditions of state terrorism not only individuals suffer, but also social structures (family, the educational system, the courts, the parliament, the church) are undermined and corrupted by violence.

The Argentinean panel I have been discussing was one of several workshops on this theme. For the survivors, neoliberal development qualifies as a witch hunt because over the span of two decades - 1970-1990 - it killed over 1,000,000 people suspected as ‘communists’ (Castañeda 1994). Since 2001, the powers have been labeling as terrorists anyone opposed to the government’s policies, anyone concerned about the plight of the poor, about human rights, and, of course, the poor themselves. Many of the workshops argued that women’s rebellion, as mothers and

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<sup>4</sup> El testimonio (The testimony) is a first-person account of a person's life experiences, with attention to the injustices the person has suffered and how he/she has been affected by them. It is based on the belief that to heal, individuals who have been victimized must regain the power to direct the course of their lives. The testimonies work on the same psychological principle as testimonies of victims of sexual abuse. Naming the violence and the perpetrator frees the victim psychologically from shame and terror, at least to some extent. Just as feminist principles validate personal experiences, testimony validates personal experiences as a basis for truth and knowledge, and personal morality as a standard for public virtue (for the whole community).

grandmothers, redefined the essence of the women's movement in Latin America, and played a central role in a continental oppositional response to the neoliberal agenda. Since the First World Social Forum in 2001, mothers and grandmothers of *Plaza de Mayo* were among those responding to the challenge raised by the profiteers of the World Economic Forum organized in Davos.<sup>5</sup> In Davos, global elite managers, statesmen, and media personalities met to forge an agenda to convince us that globalization is in our best interest, while social justice activists in Porto Alegre (Brasil) and Venezuela tell us that **another world is possible and necessary**.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.weforum.org/>  
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