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History of Human Rights

A Lexicon of Terror

This book by Marguerite Feitlowitz is a story of a war that most of the world knows almost nothing about. The Dirty War in Argentina was a tragic, secret, genocide; Genocide of anyone who got in the way of the new government, and better, anyone who had any intelligent thought at all. The fear the new government instilled in the people of Argentina was not just that of what was happening, but of how they talked about it. Marguerite calls it, The Lexicon of Terror; The language that was used to instill fear, to pretend to calm the masses, and to rid the country of “subversives.”

In the very first couple of pages, Marguerite writes what the new regime used the language to do. She writes, “(1) shroud in mystery its true actions and intentions, (2) say the opposite of what it meant, (3) inspire trust, both at home and abroad, (4) instill guilt, especially in mothers, to seal their complicity, and (5) sow paralyzing terror and confusion.” (pg 20) The regime took over in Argentina and the people welcomed change. There had been chaos, and change and leadership is always welcome in times of unrest. But instead of progressing, the regime began taking people, making them “disappear,” and making the people believe that it was not happening. When they mentioned the “desaparecidos,” they made it seem as though they had left the country, or they had killed one another. But the some knew. Some had missing daughters, missing sons, missing uncles, nephews, nieces, and so on. Those who tried to find their family members were treated with disdain and when rallying to find their families, other Argentines marched for the regime, “We Argentines are human, we Argentines are right.” This saying is in response to the world and the families of the disappeared having a call for human rights. Sayings like this one invoked national pride, and also gave the people who said it, the message that nothing bad was going on. Though the saying had truly no response to the question, “where is my loved one?” it gave the people who didn’t understand something to defend, something to help them be on the side with the power, a reason to not have to see the people disappearing.

The regime took everything that was said and turned it for their own use. It didn’t matter if it the outside world knew it was all lies, it was inside Argentina that had to believe the regime’s cover-ups. They took one woman, Thelma Jara de Cabezas, was fighting for the disappeared, and advocating from outside of Argentina. She returned to the forbidding country when her husband got sick and was kidnapped very soon thereafter. She was forced the give an interview with a woman’s magazine and the entire article is made up by the regime and speaks of her guilt for working with the subversives.

One of the amazing ways the regime used their language was by teaching it to their prisoners and making them produce a newspaper, in advocacy of the regime. No one knew that the paper was written by the prisoners, and they said that it was quite strange to be writing the paper for the people who locked them up, but even their torturers would call them “journalists.” One man had become a collaborator and still wrote the column for human rights. One of the other prisoners said, “That was hair-raising, he had completely internalized their language.” Which is exactly what the regime had wanted. They used certain language to make the people internalize their ideas so that no one worried about the people who were disappearing.

The most incredible way the regime used language was combined with physical torture. They would torture the prisoners and then after they had been through the pain, the guards would tell them they would be tortured. The constant knowledge that the pain will happen again can be worse than physical pain. When pain comes on in a surprising fashion it is not feared, but knowing that it is coming can make someone go crazy. The people who don’t know torture, who have never been tortured, and worse, did not know of the torture, could not even begin to imagine what was going on in the concentration camps. They couldn’t grasp the severity of the war because they, even if threatened, did not *know* the pain that could result from it. There was also this kind of fear in the transfers, where the prisoners would be sedated and thrown out of a plane in the sea. The fear of never knowing when you could be killed, or worse, not knowing if you wanted to die or live, those were the things that the prisoners feared the most. The word, “transfer” would now be a word of fear for people, because it was used to show who would die and who wouldn’t, and it would have to make you choose whether you were strong enough to decide whether you *wanted* to die or not.

Another way of language torture, was unlike the Nazi’s who didn’t tell the Jews anything, these guards easily told the prisoners, “You are nothing, you are no one, no one is looking for you, you are simply now a number.” It wasn’t that the prisoners had heard it so much that they believed it; it was that to these guards and torturers, they were truly nobodies. A recurring theme in the book is the memory that all the players are human: the torturers and the people they tortured, the people on the street and the people in the prison, the regime and the people on the street. One woman describes being in the infirmary and being able to hear and see the people walking outside, going on with life as usual. “To be so close to them, for them to be so close to us, and yet so far away,” that was the worst. Another man, Mario Villani, spoke of how the guards must have seen the prisoners as nonpersons. He believed that to use 220 volts of electricity on someone then you must see them as a nonperson. But most importantly he said, “…it wasn’t just to survive, but to survive as *me*.” He did not want to become like his torturers, he wanted to always realize that both he and his torturers were both human, he would not look at them like they looked at him. Mario also brings up another strange relationship. He discusses a woman, a prisoner, Lucia, who ended up marrying the man who invented the machine they used to torture the prisoners. Mario knew the man, Cat, had been at least present at some of Lucia’s torturing, but they were a couple after the war ended. These relationships are unfathomable to most, but it is all in the concept of the complexity of the situation. That all the parties involved are human, but only some are capable of seeing it that way. Torture is so unnatural, so *un-human,* that the reaction to it by those who torture and those who have been tortured cannot be known before, or even judged; their lives have gone a course that many will not even know or see.

The idea of “being human,” seems to be the one that comes up most evidently because of the inhumanity of the torture; it’s unnaturalness made sure that “What is human?” was a normal question. Marguerite writes, “The battle, as I have been told by more than one survivor, was to remember that you were *human*. As one man put it to me, ‘The physical evidence goes against you, you’re so weak, so sick, so tormented, you think, if you *can* think: I *am* my shit; I *am* these stinking wounds; I *am* this festering sore. That is what you have to fight. And it’s goddamn difficult; because whenever they feel like it, they replenish the physical evidence that goes against you.’” They also kept everyone blindfolded, in their own small tube, shackled and alone. The idea was to make them feel alone, and humanity rests on social contact, which was impossible. The only social contact the people received was from those who tortured them. This is why it becomes so complex, because the only reminder they had that they were human was the contact between people who tortured them, which is completely inhuman. The confusion was exactly what the regime wanted. Though, there were some cases where the prisoners had small interactions with one another, and most remember these interactions so intensely, even the smallest of things, because they were reminders of their compassion, and humanity.

One of the best examples of the complexity is described by Mario, he tells Marguerite, “Like the 1978 World Soccer Championship. I was in El Banco. The guys running the camp decided that as this was an historic event for Argentina they would arrange for everyone to enjoy it. In quotes. Or maybe not in quotes. See? The limits become blurred. Back and forth between the double message. They didn’t have the means to put together an auditorium or viewing room. So they brought in a TV—stolen, of course, and repaired by me—and put up on a high platform at the end of a long corridor. The tubes lined this corridor. They opened our cells, let us raise our *tabiques* to our foreheads and sit in the doorway on the floor. Still shackled, still cuffed, we watched the game. And shouted the goals.” More examples of being in prison and being thrown bits of ‘the outside world’ are given by Mario and it leads to his description of language becoming the prison. Even after he left the camps, he spoke differently, in ways that some could not understand. The prisoners had to find ways to communicate and often it became things that people who were outside the camps wouldn’t notice.

The chapter Mario is in is called “Night and Fog.” It’s perfect, because at night in the fog, you can barely see anything, maybe a little something, but mostly nothing. That is what the people on the outside saw. Nothing, they saw tiny signs of danger, of the horror going on below their line of vision, but they ignored it, because it was in the fog. Also, this applies to the prisoner’s way of communicating. They could notice because they knew what to look for, but others would never see what they could. They didn’t have the time to understand, but in a camp, prisoners had all the time in the world, and even more time to find common place and comfort with those around them.

The issue of the Jews in Argentina is one that I have been trying to figure out. Why not save their own? After the Holocaust, how could they not put more effort into saving their Jewish brethren? The Holocaust took all Jews, so maybe they thought if all the Jews weren’t taken then it wasn’t a Jewish issue, it was an issue of criminals. That’s probably how they justified it; the disappeared were criminals in the eyes of the public and the government and the Jewish DAIA didn’t want anyone to think of Jews as criminals, so they kept quiet and complied. The DAIA is only one group, one Jewish party, who didn’t work to save the people who were taken, but their compliance is painful. It makes everyone look at how they would have handled the situation. Would I have done something? Would I have spoken out? Would I have died so others could live? Would I have stood up for those who were silenced? Everyone wishes in their fantasy worlds that they would be the hero, but if faced with extreme torture and death, what would truly happen? I can’t know, but the DAIA chose the easy route, one that probably ended in their demise. Pain and sorrow and danger don’t last forever; somehow, the danger, the bad times will end, and you have to be on the right side, the morally strong side, when it does, or you, too, will perish.

The next group of people discussed is the Agrarian Leagues. This group consisted of the peasants, the tobacco farmers, of the non-urban areas. The peasants had it worse than the people in the city because almost no one cared about the rural areas as it was, they had been cheated out of money, and were frequently oppressed, so when the coup took place, the peasants were the easiest to harm. They were frequently taken to fields and tortured in front of their families, or left on the side of the road to die; as Sergio put it, “…the repression was shameless.” Sergio Tomasella, a former Secretary General of the Agrarian Leagues helped Marguerite to complete her history with his knowledge of the rural regime. Not that it didn’t take time. Sergio was afraid of spies and after his first meeting with Marguerite, where he mistook her for a Brazilian, he was wary to meet with her again. Three years later, he allowed for a meeting. One of the many military police who watch Sergio, made a joke about a death flight. The reference is crude, but does not make Sergio blink. However, I am shocked that anyone could be so naïve, so completely shameless to make a joke about something that most of the world would gasp at. Even after the regime ended, there were actually people who believed that throwing a living person out of a plane under sedation was acceptable to society, to God, to humanity. (Whoever may be up there, I would love to hear the conversation between any god and that man at the entrance to heaven…) But one of the main problems that have happened to the peasants of the rural areas is that now they are terrified to organize. They made the Agrarian Leagues, and the coup took it out like it was an ant. The idea of becoming any kind of group was subversive. Basically, if you belonged to any kind of organized group in Argentina, any group that represented a people, to help them with their needs, the regime would take it out. That fear had not yet been erased, especially with the military police still making death flight jokes.

Sergio also recognized the use of words as torture. He spoke of how even though the prisons removed all sense of humanity; the guards would put the radio on, almost a tease to the outside world. Sergio tells Marguerite,

“The next day we heard the official explanation on the radio news: that while a group of prisoners was being transferred from Resistencia to another prison, the truck was attacked by ‘their terrorist *companeros*, trying to free them.’ In the shoot-out with the ‘Monotoneros,’ all of the prisoners, themselves ‘subversives,’ were killed. A close call for the forces of order, et cetera, et cetera. Of course we knew it was a lie. The specifics I learned later: The prisoners were driven to the remote settlement of Margarita Belen where, staggering and disoriented from electrical torture, they were finished off with machine guns. See them being taken was torment enough; hearing the propaganda was unbearable. In their hands, even the radio was an instrument of torture.” (pg 126)

Sergio’s wife, Anita, was also a part of the Agrarian Leagues and planned on dedicating her life to it, to its justice. She was captured also and imprisoned, but for less time than Sergio and when she was released she went to Mexico for a while. Eventually Sergio followed and they only returned to Argentina when it was safe.

One of the women who were also captured with Anita has a different reaction to speaking with Marguerite. Anita’s friend, Carmen, is still physically unable to talk about her life. She was a school teacher and still is, and though a good and fun person, she is unable to live in peace. She cries, says she is innocent and tells of other teachers calling her a criminal. The other teachers should be thanking their stars they too were not taken.

One story that truly rocked my senses, was about a woman, Susan Barros, who after boarding bus #128, was dragged off of it by her hair and beat on the sidewalk. Then, like the rest, brought to a prison to be tortured. No one on the bus did anything, except for the one woman who whispered, “Not by her hair.” No one did anything, which is almost understandable, since soldiers who disappear a person on a public bus are obviously not worried about any consequences. The people knew they could do nothing, and they were probably quite surprised by the sudden violence taking place in front of their eyes. These things are not normal in our society; people do not know how to react to them, or how to talk about it. So in essence, they pretended they did not know what happened, they saw nothing.

This excuse was present everywhere. “I knew, but I didn’t know.” I believe that this is a human reaction to something so unnatural as the taking, kidnapping, and torture of other people. It is hard to know what is going on, when the mind is confused as to how it could be happening. This is why I believe that people are not mentally created to be able to do these things. Hence, it makes the people who witness it think they didn’t see what they actually saw; the guards be able to torture because they have no true concept of it; and the prisoners to survive it because their brains don’t understand that they shouldn’t live. One of the conversations that shows the constant excuse was between Marguerite and a woman she calls Suki,

“Silently, she gathered our cups and placed them on a tray. ‘Even now,’ she mused, ‘you have to wonder. Did it happen? Can it be?’

‘But you saw,’ I said gently.

‘No,’ she insisted, ‘we knew nothing. Even now.’”

Marguerite tries to understand the phenomenon as well. “Who intrigued me were those who simultaneously saw and didn’t see; understood and didn’t know.” These are the same things that intrigue me. I truly believe that their concept of torture, of violence, was so unnatural that the people did not have time to learn the concept and react. It may be a fantasy to believe that these concepts are inhuman, but how can we truly feel hope if we believe that torture and violence are ingrained in everyone.

Or possibly, sadly, it could be that the amount of violence eventually became the norm. The people found a corpse and at the beginning, people wondered, but by the end, a corpse was just another day in the life of Argentina. We know that today in our society, we have become more and more immune to the idea of violence, with video games and movies, but even so, to actually inflict violence and be the one who it is inflicted on is extremely tormenting, to both parties. In the long run, even many of the torturers were ashamed and guilty and depressed.

The long lasting torment is the main issue today in Argentina. The government wanted and still wants to turn the page, and so do the people who were not directly affected by the torture, or the disappeared. But how can those who have never had closure, and have been so far removed from the normalcy of society just go back to the way things were before. They can’t. The government and the unaffected Argentines need to use their empathy to help the others heal, but they are so ashamed for not helping when it was needed that they can’t even face anyone who had been hurt by the Dirty War. All these concepts are understandable, but no one will rise above it. That is the saddest part.

One of the father’s of a disappeared tells Marguerite, “They took Pablo, our seventeen year old son, from the family apartment at 2 AM. A few hours later, the neighborhood woke up as usual: Newspaper stands were open, buses were running, children were going to school.” This non-action by the police to look for any disappeared helped to make everything feel like it never happened. In the US, if a 17 year old disappears everything stops for days in that neighborhood at least. The non-reaction from everyone only exacerbated the whole situation.

The issue of the after affect, of military men coming forward with news after they had been released from jail is a blur to me. I have still not yet absorbed the actual war to be able to go beyond it. I have pledged to reread the last chapters again after everything has sunk in. What I have gotten, is that, though the military men came forward with most likely the wrong intentions, they are still traumatized by what they’ve done and what they’ve seen. Years later, the reality is setting in, and their emotional state can’t absorb the inhumane acts that they were a part of. Some came forward, but didn’t have any remorse, which shows they have yet to absorb it, but mostly, their release is their downfall. They, too, needed to heal, with extreme psychotherapy, preferably behind bars. The lack of healing in the country is astounding to me, and as I said I have truly not absorbed the end of the story. I am, however, planning to use this piece of work and others like it in future work towards my sociology minor. It is truly an incredible piece of history that has been quieted and forgotten.

The truth of this book is that a government was able to use every piece of language and propaganda and society to invite terror and fear into its people, but also torture those it had already taken. The complexities that this torture and terror brought forth are so incredible that it would take forever to go through each complex thought process and realize all of the details of its depth. Did the government know that they were causing such truly deep confusion in the people? Did they have any concept of the true pain they were causing? I can’t imagine they truly knew how intense the wounds they inflicted mentally were. They can’t possibly have known because they didn’t have the same love and compassion that the people they hurt did. Their inflictions live on in the people of Argentina. Without healing, the country may forever be lost in a chasm of despair and broken souls.