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### **Review / Reseña**

Gatti, Gabriel. *Surviving Forced Disappearance in Argentina and Uruguay: Identity and Meaning*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

## **Rethinking Conceptualizations of Identity of the Detained-Disappeared**

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When analyzing the subject of the *desaparecidos*, the detained-disappeared individuals under the dictatorships at the end of the twentieth century in the Southern Cone, a problem immediately arises: how does one even begin to speak about what is unspeakable? How does one represent that which is unrepresentable? How can one even begin to discuss a subject that defies the limits of language? Fields including sociology, trauma studies, literature, cultural studies, and human rights law, among others, all come near the void created by this phenomenon, yet none is able to completely touch it nor articulate it fully. Each field has a variety of different strategies that attempt to grapple with the uncomfortable paradox of lacking adequate

language for this issue, yet all fall short of completely solving the riddle. In his most recent book, *Surviving Forced Disappearance in Argentina and Uruguay: Identity and Meaning* (2014), sociologist Gabriel Gatti suggests that perhaps the problem is not solely the lack of adequate language, rather the need to use different tools and formulate a new approach in dealing with the detained-disappeared.

Gatti speaks both as a sociologist as well as a relative of disappeared family members during the Southern Cone dictatorships of the 1970s. His analysis is both rigorous as well as personal—qualities which are both necessary and helpful when attempting to create an accurate sketch of the subject at hand (in as much accuracy as possible for an unrepresentable subject). Gatti hypothesizes that, “[Forced disappearance appears]...as something that affects identity and makes it impossible for it to be represented and experienced as it normally is in the West, and that dismantles the conditions of possibility that support our strategies of representation” (12). Forced disappearance is thus a “catastrophe for identity and meaning,” catastrophe rather than trauma because he conceptualizes it as a permanent structure that is impossible to fix (15). To defend this hypothesis, he sets up two complex, yet interlinked frameworks of cause and effect.

The first framework deals with forced disappearance in terms of its causes. He first proposes that forced disappearance, “derives from the same historical process that established civilization” (158) and it puts in peril three elements which sustain the modern meaning of identity: civilization, the nation-state, and the citizen-individual. He uses the metaphor of a machine in two different modes to explain how the State acts to civilize and to destroy: when the machine is in civilizing mode, it forms populations of citizen-individuals grouped in a nation-state with a given territory, it forms societies through words and ideas with the rationalizing ideals of order and progress, and then populates the world with these modern civilized individuals. He

calls this situation the “Lettered City,” citing Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics and Ángel Rama’s idea of the Latin American city as both enlightened and literary. Using the metaphor of a diligent gardener, the State functioned to remove “weeds” to create, “[t]he modern order of representation in a state of paroxysm” (20). In this way, Gatti suggests that the disappearances of those individuals who were “pruned” by the States in the Southern Cone pointed to an excessive modernity rather than to a collapse of civilization. He argues that, “perhaps, more than the hypothesis of a collapse of civilization or a sudden barbarization, it might be more accurate to argue that *what we witnessed with the coup d’états of the 1970s was actually an exacerbated rationality [sic]*” (25). This is when the State machine acts in its second mode, excessively carrying out the rationalizing weeding to the point that it acts against itself by eliminating these citizen-individuals who are modern subjects with full citizenship and all of the bureaucratic paperwork. By revoking these credentials and disposing of the evidence in the massive machine with the same bureaucratic efficiency in which they were originally issued, the citizen-individual is *chupado* (sucked up), erased, dissociated, and is made into a non-person, a non-entity: a detained-disappeared.

What results from those who disappeared into a *chupadero* (a “sucker” or place where the disappeared vanish), is the “living-dead,” bodies without names and names without bodies, those that are neither living nor dead (30). The paradox of this new state of being is uncomfortable and this discomfort and pain caused by lack of language points to the core of what makes moving beyond the void impossible for survivors and their families. Gatti complicates this further by questioning what it means to have a modern identity and what these results mean for the detained-disappeared:

The most established image of what it means to have an identity in the modern West presupposes that the entity endowed with such a virtue be sustained by three

indivisible bonds: (1) the union between a name and a body (in the form of an individual) that is (2) embedded in a collective history (in the form of a family novel) that enables it to imagine its time as an enduring era, and which, finally, (3) is anchored to the present in a firm, stable, lasting community, which among us takes the form of a nation-state. If it meets these conditions, then that entity is said to have a *Name* [sic] of its own, a unique *History* [sic], and a delimited *Territory* [sic]. (159)

Forced-disappearance severs these bonds and rips apart the “ontological unity” of a human being, the unity of one name with one body. It severs the union of this associated name and body with its family narrative. Lastly, the machine cuts the ties of the relationship between the citizen-individual from its community, which is legitimated by the State, and revokes the citizenship bond with the State. The effect of forced-disappearance, in short, is the complete destruction of the modern identity. The inverted civilizing machine is an apparatus that de-civilizes and destroys identity rather than creating it, but which uses the same machinery to accomplish both tasks.

The second framework that Gatti uses to structure his argument is that of forced-disappearance in terms of its effects. He first suggests that forced-disappearance is imagined as an unfixable disruption: after the fallout of the catastrophe, “once the belief that it *was not* [sic] normal takes hold, it becomes difficult to grasp within the normal frameworks of subjectivity” (160). Family members of the disappeared become lost in a void and the disappeared becomes an absent-presence who is neither dead nor alive. This catastrophe is permanent, but Gatti suggests that this void is a space which is uncomfortable, difficult to experience or imagine as it is, “defined by the rupturing of the conventional relations between social reality and language,” but that it is indeed an inhabitable space (161).

One reaction to the catastrophe, and arguably the most common, is to restore, rebuild, and remake what was destroyed. Gatti calls these efforts “narratives of meaning,” arguing that in

various ways, survivors, family members, and institutions attempt to fill the void of disappearance with meaning. Gatti argues that these attempts are “motivated not only by a (laudable) mandate of justice and restitution, but also by the (questionable) impulse to fill the void left by forced disappearance and other catastrophes with meaning” (33). In an extensive analysis of ruins, forensic anthropology, archives, activism, and human rights law, he points out the many diverse efforts from different fields—notably the efforts of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo to use blood and DNA to create a (questionable?) link between blood and identity, between origin and destiny, under the paradigm of the stable modern identity—to restore meaning to the void.

Gatti proposes an alternative solution to the “narratives of meaning” by arguing that rather than attempt to fill the voids with meaning and exorcise the ghosts and paradoxes of the disappeared—the largest of which, Giorgio Agamben notes, is that those who can give testimony cannot speak, and those who can speak have nothing to say—that the absence and the emptiness of the void is an inhabitable space in itself, that seeing the absence of data as data in itself, and to inhabit a space of discomfort, accepting the paradoxes as they are on their terms and creating a new language to represent the unrepresentable are all possible solutions. Gatti also sees the creation of the field of the detained-disappeared as a leap forward, as well as the adoption of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance by the United Nations General Assembly in 2006. He argues that these moves point to a “transnationalization” of the detained-disappeared.

He first cautions that the “colonizing force” of the transnational disappeared risks a “colonization that is aesthetic, historical, and social, a colonization that erases differences and confines the subject...within a model that turns the subject, necessarily, into a suffering victim” (166). He also points to the positive effects of the recognition of the detained-disappeared in

international humanitarian law and the creation of the field of the detained-disappeared with international consequences. Gatti argues that “The *Argentine definition* [sic] of the archetypal disappeared...has been passed into law. That will be the yardstick for any other product of forced disappearance practices...” however, one could object that this point could use further clarification (162). This archetype, he proposes, undergoes a transformation in the construction of the “transnational disappeared” within the realm of legal texts. He points out that this construction could be used for creation of the term “transatlantic disappeared” in the context of studying how this phenomenon circulates from the Southern Cone to Spain and across temporal limits in the case of the disappeared during Spanish Civil War (163). He then proposes a second transformation to that of “local disappeared” which is incorporated into the transnational type to apply the same paradigm to diverse national and historical spaces. Gatti moves a step further when he maintains in his conclusion that the field and figure of the disappeared creates a space for a metaphor for explaining the peculiar conditions of the marginalized, the unemployed, the homeless, the deranged, and the exiled: all those figures who are uncomfortable, invisible, absent and present at the same time. His contribution to sociology: that the disappeared has moved from “*explanandum*—that *which needs explaining*—to *explanans*—that *which explains*,” the disappeared as a concept, underscores the importance of Gatti’s study and how this analysis can be furthered in other fields as well (168).

In a relatively short book, Gatti composes a complex argument which draws on theories from sociology, cultural studies, philosophy, anthropology, human rights law, art, and activism. While the theories presented are quite dense and very complex, Gatti thoughtfully explains the terminology that he uses as well as clearly explains the framework for his arguments throughout the book. Some of his arguments can be quite

controversial, notably his critiques of established “moral techniques” for grappling with the paradoxes and problems surrounding the disappeared, which may spark debate. His contribution shows an original thought process in forming links between many different disciplines and has a great deal to offer to sociologists who study marginalized groups. Further research could be done in the field of linguistics using Gatti’s suggestion for the creation of new language for phenomena that are unrepresentable, as well as the application of this research to current discourses surrounding the detained-disappeared.