

Review / Reseña

Sharnak, Debbie. *Of Light and Struggle: Social Justice, Human Rights, and Accountability in Uruguay*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2023. 337 pp.

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From 1973 to 1985, Uruguayans lived under a brutal authoritarian government. The military dictatorship arrested a stunning one in fifty people, which represented the world's highest rate of political incarceration. Facing extreme repression and the threat of imprisonment, more than ten percent of the population went into exile. Uruguay's descent into dictatorship mirrored the regimes of neighboring countries, but it marked an aberration in a nation known for stable democratic rule. In *Of Light and Struggle: Social Justice, Human Rights, and Accountability in Uruguay*, historian Debbie Sharnak traces Uruguay's transition from dictatorship to democracy. Her study untangles how divergent actors invoked the language of human rights and the nation's social justice tradition to advocate for a more just society and the return of democracy. In doing so, Sharnak illustrates the contingency of human rights discourse, which expanded or contracted in response to national, regional, and international conditions.

Sharnak divides her study into seven chronological chapters, emphasizing how ideas and perceptions of human rights changed throughout Uruguayan history. Chapter One examines the gradual breakdown of the country's political system in the 1960s. While scholars have overwhelmingly focused on the Tupamaros, a revolutionary group that advocated for armed action, Sharnak looks beyond the

infamous urban guerrilla group to uncover how labor unions, political parties, and student movements rejected an increasingly repressive government. These groups drew on Uruguay's history of strong welfare protections to advocate for diverse social and political projects. In their view, human rights addressed a broad set of issues, ranging from freedom from torture to the guarantee of social services. These actors and their causes illustrate the expansive and fluid language of human rights in the pre-dictatorship period.

As the government gradually ceded power to the military, popular demands for an end to torture, disappearance, and imprisonment replaced earlier calls for more comprehensive human rights projects. Uruguayan activists—particularly those in exile—used human rights discourse to draw attention to government repression and to appeal to foreign governments and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Their narrow focus on protection from torture and political incarceration reflected immediate concerns for survival as well as priorities of the emerging transnational human rights movement. Sharnak underscores how minimalist calls for an end to specific violations secured Uruguay's inclusion on the agenda of organizations like Amnesty International. Simultaneously, she demonstrates that this more limited human rights agenda disproportionately harmed historically marginalized groups, which faced unique forms of institutional violence. For example, the military regime targeted Afro-Uruguayans through specific economic policies that displaced historically Black neighborhoods. These policies violated their human rights, but their concerns did not figure into the narrow agenda of transnational organizations and remained absent from advocacy campaigns during the dictatorship years.

By the mid-1970s, Uruguay was both an important contributor to and beneficiary of the transnational human rights movement. The sustained advocacy of Uruguayan activists and their allies in international NGOs garnered the attention of U.S. President Jimmy Carter. Despite the nation's limited strategic importance to Washington, Uruguay served as a "testing ground" for the president's human rights-oriented foreign policy. The Carter administration implemented a targeted program that cut military aid, denied loans, and empowered human rights-focused staff within the U.S. embassy. Sharnak's analysis of U.S. diplomacy demonstrates its shifting objectives, which brought a seemingly marginal country to the center of the president's agenda. Yet, her portrayal of Uruguay as a "key frontier" for human rights diplomacy could offer more discussion of the export, or lack thereof, Uruguayan-

tested policies elsewhere, particularly in neighboring countries experiencing similar conditions.

The Carter administration's foreign policy approach contributed to growing external pressures on the military dictatorship from intergovernmental organizations, transnational human rights movements, and exile communities. In 1980, the Uruguayan armed forces responded by holding a referendum to vote on a constitutional extension of its power. The regime lost, ushering in a gradual transition to democracy. In Chapters Four and Five, Sharnak explores the domestic, regional, and international human rights conditions that influenced this transitional process. The plebiscite weakened the military's hold on power and offered space for the reconstitution of political groups, labor unions, and student organizations. Sharnak emphasizes the circulation of ideas within the Southern Cone, where regional human rights groups influenced and supported Uruguayan activists. She illustrates how neighboring countries, undergoing their own democratic transitions, served as important models of what was politically possible in Uruguay.

In March 1985, Julio María Sanguinetti became Uruguay's first democratically elected president following the dictatorship. His inauguration marked the end of a protracted transition and ignited debates over what shape democracy would take. This period sparked renewed demands for social and economic rights that had disappeared during the dictatorship years. Union leaders fought for rights to healthcare and pensions while student groups demanded the state rebuild a university system that the military's policies had gutted. Yet, the expansion of human rights discourse to include these diverse social justice projects diverted attention from calls for justice for crimes committed during the dictatorship. Ultimately, Uruguay passed an amnesty law in 1986 for the military's crimes. Sharnak contends that amnesty reflected an enduring paradox of advances and failures in human rights. Even as human rights accountability evaded activists, new rights struggles flourished in movements for women, LGBTQ+, and minority communities.

Sharnak's analysis of Uruguay's democratic transition constitutes the central triumph of *Of Light and Struggle*. She succeeds not only in centering Uruguay in the history of the Cold War-era human rights movement but also in elucidating the complexity of democratization processes. These transitional moments reopen debates about the aspirations and limits of societal transformation, which is often a history of "fits and starts." The record of intermittent progress and occasional retreats in human rights offers a nuanced perspective that challenges scholars and activists to look

beyond Uruguay and apply these lessons to the ongoing global dialogue on democracy and human rights. *Of Light and Struggle* serves as an important reminder that the history of human rights is continuous and deeply relevant to current struggles for justice and accountability.