



Michelle D. Bonner. *Sustaining Human Rights: Women and Argentine Human Rights Organizations.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. xii + 173 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-03264-1.



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30 Years Later: Exploring the Continuing Relevance of Argentine Human Rights Organizations

In this book, Michelle Bonner offers a new contribution to the literature on Argentine human rights organizations, specifically those dedicated to issues concerning the violent repression enacted by the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). Her research works to answer the question of how these organizations gained and maintain a high degree of public support and legitimacy even into the present, some three decades after the end of military rule. She concentrates in particular on models of and for women's political participation and the notion of rights as applied and enforced by state institutions throughout Argentine history. Using these lenses she explores how human rights organizations have constructed and presented their demands to the Argentine state and to society, and the reasons for their initial and continued public relevance. The book offers a clear and tightly structured analysis of this less-studied aspect by employing the concept of framing as elaborated by social movement scholars. In doing so, Bonner provides us with a definition of framing as "... the establishment of a vocabulary that summarizes an agreed-upon meaning for actions, events, or experiences" (p. 8). She proposes an extension of this idea to include "historical frames" by

which these vocabularies "... may eventually become accepted as part of the country's values and political culture" (p. 9). The book contends that the Argentine human rights organizations interact with two such historical frames in structuring their demands. In this way, women's political participation in Argentina is argued to have been codified or "framed" in particular ways, in this case, to include women in public life as representatives of the family, defenders of morality, and defenders of the nation-as-family. The discussion of the other historical frame defined in the book concentrates on demonstrating how the state has historically provided sets of legal rights without the accompanying intention to assure their enforcement. Furthermore, it seeks to show how the idea of legal rights, even in this limited form, has itself been applied differentially to the varied sectors of Argentine society.

Bonner's central argument is that human rights organizations in Argentina framed their demands according to this historically constituted language of women's political participation, in order to challenge the historical frame of unenforced and differentially applied rights.

Importantly, this includes the assertion that they have maintained their relevance by extending the notion of the family to be protected to include those threatened by economic difficulties. Thus, she concludes that these organizations have been successful in sustaining their legitimacy and importance in society by drawing upon and adapting a historically established language of gendered political participation that made sense and resonated within Argentina.

As part of this analysis, the book contains an impressive attempt to trace these historical frames from colonial history through the present. While this vast historical overview suffers from the lack of depth perhaps inevitable in such ambitious endeavors, the idea that human rights must be understood in light of the historical development of the term within its particular context is an important contribution. In this regard, it could have been useful to look more extensively at how the notion of human rights in Argentina developed in dialogue with international formalizations of this concept, especially given Argentina's participation in the continuous process of definition in the field of international law. The broad treatment given to this historical section is balanced by a compelling descriptive depth found in the portions of the book that rely on her interviews and interactions with the leaders and participants in the human rights organizations.

The book is divided into seven chapters and includes a number of appendices. While the first four chapters are concerned primarily with the introduction and elaboration of the concept of frame analysis and its application to the case of Argentine human rights organizations, chapters 5 and 6 turn specifically to the interactions of these groups with the State and society, respectively. These chapters include useful overviews on the organizations they discuss and certain aspects of Argentine politics and society in recent years. However, at times they tend to

over generalize the analytical categories they rely upon. While in the details they nod to the difficulties in speaking about the state as a homogeneous and consistent actor, this recognition does not become fully incorporated into the theoretical analysis. Rather, the state, as the target and interlocutor of the human rights organizations, seems to come across analytically as a monolithic entity, overshadowing the complex and divergent interests present across the multiplicity of state institutions (executive, judiciary, security forces, etc). In a similar way, Argentine society tends to be presented as a unified public audience for the human rights organizations, in ways that do not adequately account for the acute divergence in perspectives that exist within Argentina.

Bonner's book will be of particular interest to social movement scholars and political scientists interested in the important questions of the relevance, resonance, and sustainability of human rights activism throughout the world. The main ideas are communicated clearly and accessibly, making this book appropriate for use in undergraduate courses. The final chapter consists of a comparison with Chile, focusing on the different nature of the historical frames that are seen as having directed the human rights organizations in that country and affected their lack of continuance into the present. This chapter, despite its brevity, is perhaps the most intriguing and will be useful to those interested in understanding the recent history of the Southern Cone region. Overall, the book is limited in its vision and scope by the analytical schema it adopts, with theoretical concerns at times taking precedence over a consideration of the nature and complexity of these organizations and their position and movement within the Argentine political landscape. Nonetheless, it provides a coherent and thought-provoking treatment of an interesting and often neglected question that is pertinent to the study of human rights organizations throughout the world.

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