Troubling Frames: Linking Past, Present and Future Through An In-Depth Analysis of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo

by

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ABSTRACT

TROUBLING FRAMES: LINKING PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE THROUGH AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF THE MADRES DE PLAZA DE MAYO

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This thesis analyzes the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, a social movement based in Argentina that began in 1977. One of the main goals of this thesis is to try to account for the split in the movement that occurred in 1986 as well as its surprising longevity to date. Scholars tend to apply either a human rights or gender-identity frame to studies of the Madres however I posit that framing the movement and its demands as strictly rights- and/or identity-based claims sets in motion a “crippling reduction” that is the central problematic of this thesis. Because of this, I argue that understanding of this movement has been limited in a fundamental way that occults its transformative potential. This study begins to reveal the complexity inherent in one of the longest-standing social movements, underlining its significance as a model for effective sustained criticism that has theoretical applicability as a heuristic device beyond the national context from which it derives. This thesis demonstrates that the Madres’ importance as a social movement can be seen not just in terms of the claims they made against the Argentine state but in terms of how they evolved and have sustained complex political and moral principles.
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“How is freedom gained? It is taken: never given...What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend it ceases to exist. Without the freedom to challenge, even to satirize all orthodoxies...it ceases to exist. Language and the imagination cannot be imprisoned or art will die, and with it, a little of what makes us human.” –Salman Rushdie
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CHAPTER 1 – Getting the Lay of the Land

1.0 Introduction

Below I provide a statement of intent in order to present the ultimate aims of this project. This is followed by a general outline providing the broad strokes of what can be expected over the next five chapters. These sections are intended to give a general overview of the thesis in its entirety and to offer the reader a sense of the logical progression of this project from start to finish.

1.0.1 Statement of Intent

In my study of the Madres’ movement I will take a feminist postmodern theoretical approach to deconstruct the typical framing of the Madres in terms of human rights discourse and gender identity politics. I will draw on several disciplines to do this including political science, sociology, philosophy, women’s studies and cultural studies. By addressing some significant internal complexity I hope to show the reasons for or causes of this movements’ surprising longevity. My hypothesis is that this complexity has not yet been fully accounted for in the literature due to a preference for neatly contained approaches, for instance those that take a strictly sociological perspective, a narrow political lens, or focus on a discreet time frame. I question the real efficacy of understanding this movement from such one-sided perspectives, and in my work instead try to weave these together to paint a new, hopefully more representational picture (even if that picture is more complex or even seemingly contradictory) of this movement. To this end, this research will trouble certain commonly held ideas and assumptions about the
Madres that have thus far remained unquestioned within the literature as a result of the strict application of either a human rights or a gender-identity frame. Comparing and contrasting the approaches of the two organizations that make up the Madres movement (the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, or AMPM, and the Línea Fundadora, or LF) will be a critical aspect of this analysis, as it will go a long way in showing the complexity I wish to foreground. To do this, I describe the Madres goals as typically falling under what I will call primary/retrospective and secondary/prospective categories. Classifying them in this way will make clear the limits of achieving these goals under the aforementioned frames and allows me to work towards the alternative meanings I suggest are present within these goals but that only become visible once the frames have been properly peeled away.

1.0.2 General Outline

The purpose of this introductory chapter is first of all to provide background information on the movement in question so as to properly contextualize the discussion and analysis that will follow; to describe the research project in detail, including methodological approach and research methods; and, to give a literature review of social movement theory in general terms, outlining some of the debates in this field. I conclude by introducing the concept of framing. In the next two chapters I will look in depth at the two most common frames applied to and

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1 Rather than fomenting further divisions and polarization within the movement, my reasons for contrasting in this way rather than focusing on similarities is two-fold. First of all, it stems from a desire to remain true to the two organizations’ self-professed differentiation, and is my attempt to avoid as much as possible misrepresenting these (at times very) distinct approaches to activism. Secondly, the split in the movement is analytically important to my thesis, as it represents a highly contentious and yet generally unknown aspect of the movement’s complexity. Investigating this split will become central to my argument if I wish to avoid falling into the traps I have come to recognize in the literature whereby in an effort to discuss “the movement” as a unified whole, the much more messy reality on the ground becomes hidden from view.
embraced by the Madres. Chapter two will entail a full discussion of the framing of the Madres as a human rights movement, a presentation of human rights discourse that underlies this frame, and some of the critiques of this discursive framing in practice. In chapter three I will discuss gender-identity framing, looking specifically at the Madres as a mother’s movement, illustrating the pertinent debates around gender-identity politics and social movements. I will then move into my own analysis in chapter four to demonstrate the ways that these frames have precluded a fuller grasp of the “logic” behind the Madres’ continued activism. I propose that such framing practices have given rise to certain restrictions in our thinking about the movement, especially in terms of its goals, thus limiting ultimate comprehension of its transformative potential. My analysis will draw on philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt’s (1988) notion of unthinkability to explain the deficit left by applying a rational/irrational dichotomy and other binaristic logic to this movement. Next, I will suggest a new interpretation of the Madres by distinguishing between the verbs “to know” in Spanish in an effort to reveal latent “subjugated knowledges” of this movement’s demands. I will then reinforce this analysis by applying it to other cases where I maintain important parallels can be drawn. In the final chapter I will use this new approach to analyze the Madres’ slogan “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia” in an attempt to glean its alternative meaning given what we now know about the movements’ subjugated knowledge and internal complexity. I will end with some conclusions about Argentina in general, the Madres, and their legacy which emphasize the unique nature of this case but also the significance and transferability of the critical line of inquiry advanced in this thesis, and championed by the Madres. Lastly, I will end by offering some potential areas where further research is warranted.
1.1 Methods

This project is qualitative and exploratory in nature. My data comes from a variety of sources, including data collected during four weeks of fieldwork in Buenos Aires, Argentina during the months of January and February 2014. This fieldwork consisted of observation of the Madres’ weekly public rallies in the Plaza de Mayo (four in total), visits to the Madres’ headquarters, and semi-structured interviews with five current active members of the Madres movement (including founding and newer members from both the AMPM and LF), that took place at their offices and in their homes. I consulted the digital archives available on the Madres’ websites, as well as gained access to special archival collections of the Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina Mariano Moreno, where I watched video recordings of twelve interviews with members of the Madres and other organizations as part of a series called the Programa de derechos humanos, focusing on testimonies of human rights activists. This data is complemented by a selection of the vast literature written on, by and about the Madres movement produced since its inception, covering both primary and secondary sources such as scholarly journal articles, newspaper columns and books. These offer an array of different perspectives on the Madres as well as other social movements, which serve as an important point of reference and comparison.

In order to be rigorous in my research, I ensured the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Liamputtong, 2013, pp. 24-27) were respected to the best of my ability during my fieldwork. Furthermore, I employ triangulation defined as the

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2 AMPM website can be accessed here: www.madres.org; most useful to my work were the transcriptions of their weekly rallies, which can be found here: http://www.madres.org/navegar/nav.php?id sitio=5&idcat=82&idindex=173

LF website here is accessible here: http://www.madresfundadoras.blogspot.com.ar/
combination of multiple sources, methods, theories, data and/or researchers in order to strengthen the credibility of my research (Liamputtong, 2013, pp. 30-2). I mean to employ this method not according to its traditional usage in quantitative analysis as a means of validating findings, but rather following Hesse-Biber, who elaborates a more broadly construed notion of triangulation as a “loose boundary concept” that is able to uncover truly “subjugated knowledge” (2012, p. 139), which is consistent with the Foucauldian analysis I employ in this project. Hesse-Biber argues that the flexibility and “vagueness” of this concept is better suited to feminist research as it does not privilege one form of knowledge or understanding over another, making it able to reveal “dissonant data” and facilitate the expression of multiple realities that is inclusive of difference (2012, p. 138, 140). For her, this inductive approach to triangulation is much more conducive to interdisciplinary understanding of complex issues than traditional positivist triangulation which takes a decidedly deductive approach, using multiple data sets to simply confirm previously held hypotheses (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 139). As such, my research undertakes several types of triangulation as discussed by Liamputtong, including theoretical, methodological, interdisciplinary and data (2013, pp. 30-32).

1.2 Methodology

I undertook this field research from a critical, interdisciplinary perspective, using several different but related theoretical frameworks from disciplines ranging from philosophy and ethics, to political science, sociology, (cognitive) psychology, (social) anthropology, cultural studies and history. Certain so-called standpoint feminist theory has been influential in my thinking about the Madres movement (Harding, 2004a & 2004b; Hartsock, 2010/1983; Haraway, 2010/1988;
Sprague & Zimmerman, 2004). In a similar vein, care ethics as elaborated by Nel Noddings (2010) and Sarah Ruddick (1989), play an important role in my understanding and analysis. I will use political philosophy, specifically Michel Foucault’s (1980, 1984) notions of power/knowledge and disciplinary power in relation to the human rights regime and Harry G. Frankfurt’s (1988) notion of the unthinkable. In chapters four and five I will employ Elizabeth Jelin’s work on memory and truth, especially collective memory work in post-dicatorship societies. I will also draw on work done by Alberto Melucci (1996) and James Jasper (1997, 1998), two critical social theorists who take a “cultural” approach focusing on the role of emotion in collective action from a postmodern and constructionist theoretical position, respectively. All of these works have in common a combined strong focus on the micro-level of everyday lived experiences, without losing sight of the overarching macro-level structural and systemic variables, thus offering a unique balance of theoretical and practical applicability that is needed when conducting research of such a broad, exploratory (but also very specifically defined) nature.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach is a critical aspect of this work if the research is to shine a light on the complexity of social relations and social change on these different discursive levels and avoid being reductionist. Further, the feminist recognition of the power dynamics that affect all things we do and say, as women, and as people living in a patriarchal society, coupled with the postmodern/post-structural/post-positivist deconstruction of “grand narratives of positivist science” and the focus on contextualized, multiple identities (Liamputtong, 2013, p. 13) allows an analysis of women’s social movements in general, and the Madres in particular, that avoids typical essentializing tendencies. The paradoxical aspects of the Madres under
investigation make this case impossible to understand from a single perspective, and attempts at analysis that take or infer such binary thinking prove fatally partial. I wish to avoid the tendency to reduce social phenomena to a “single powerful metaphor” that is “overextended” in an effort to explain something succinctly as this effectively hides the other important dimensions at play (Jasper, 1997, p. 39). Sprague and Zimmerman (2004, p. 39) argue against the use of dualistic thinking in favor of an “inclusive feminist methodology,” which this research endeavours to employ. What is more, a feminist standpoint seems to be the most honest approach to qualitative research of such an exploratory nature, since the personal bias of the researcher is brought to the fore and used to inform the pursuit of knowledge on a certain subject (Sprague & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 39). This form of acknowledging each person’s ‘truth’ while remaining cognizant of the latent power dynamics that structure society, strikes me as pertinent to the case of the Madres, wherein definitions of truth and justice are a central point of contention. While I acknowledge that this is an ambitious undertaking, I feel that my research must make use of these various bodies of knowledge, as each makes a unique and valuable contribution. This thesis represents a concerted effort to speak across disciplines in an open manner that, because of the level of difficulty involved, is rarely done; an attempt at stitching together many pieces of seemingly disparate areas of academic pursuit to achieve a newfound wholeness. And although the result is a complicated patchwork, I feel strongly that it cannot be otherwise if it is to be truly reflective of the chaotic and complex jumble that characterizes our lives and our world in the postmodern era.
1.2.1 On Asking Questions: Some Methodological Considerations

It is possible to cultivate a more inclusive understanding of, and improve our thinking around, social movements and identities in the postmodern era using the ideas of power/knowledge articulated by Foucault (1980). In this vein, it is necessary not only to ask ourselves what questions we are asking (or have been asked) but also what questions aren’t we asking (or have not yet been asked). This evolves from a musing about conventional questions (and their answers, for they always have answers) and why these so often prove unsatisfactory, which results in a probing that inevitably leads to the uncomfortable conclusion that, put rather simply, “we don’t know what we don’t know.”

According to a post-positivist framework like Foucault’s something must always remain unknown once we have the answers to these “conventional” questions, rendering them to some degree always dissatisfying. What are the silences that such questions maintain intact? The next step necessarily requires great courage in attempting to give shape to these silences, to ascertain what are the difficult unasked questions (to say nothing of their ultimate answerability). Here are some of the difficult or unwelcome questions surrounding the Madres that are not only possible to ask using a post-structuralist approach, but are in fact required: What is understood/gained/achieved when we call the Madres a human rights movement? A women’s/mother’s movement? What escapes the purview of these frames? Or, what understanding is precluded when we implement them? We can tease out this chasm poignantly by looking at the Madres’ goals as they are deduced from the logic of human rights

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3 This is a paraphrase of the famous answer given in 2002 by former United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, upon being questioned regarding the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. His overall political views and intentions notwithstanding, he made a thought provoking point in his characterization of ‘unknown and known knowns’ that is very a propos to the discussion of meaning making, since it relates directly to contention over what (and who) defines “truth,” “fact,” and hints at the slipperiness and illusory capacity of the certainty/uncertainty dichotomy, especially when it is used for political ends.
and gender identity frames, and then comparing them to the goals that emerge once these are fully critiqued and deconstructed, gleaning new meaning from this new perspective.

These lines of inquiry are similar to those espoused by Jasper, who posits a need for a cultural approach to the study of protest movements “to see dynamics invisible to those [earlier] lenses” (1997, p. 9), which can in turn “generate new ways of understanding the complexities of the human condition” (1997, p. 13). Such radical thinking is also the starting point for Alberto Melucci’s analysis of collective action in which he begins by decrying the “inertia of old categories” (1996, p. 1). Both theorists seek to open new avenues for thought, using what we already know as building blocks but without being bound by the dogmatism of traditional scholarship.

Taking up these subjects in this way puts us in a better position to ask: What sort of ‘truth’ is produced and propagated by failing to address these deeper, more difficult questions? And further, what is at stake if we continue to ignore them as we have been doing? This is indicative of the transformative potential of such critique. Asking these questions about consequences is only possible once the rigid frameworks inherited from the past have been sufficiently destabilized. If the state of our planet is any indication, it is high time we started looking at things from a different angle and were open to the possibility that what we have done up until now may not only be hugely flawed but may in fact be counter-productive in the achievement of our goals and therefore detrimental.

1.3 Locating the Researcher, Situating the Research Project

This project grew from my first encounter with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, when I
watched a documentary in an undergraduate course on gender and global inequality and was deeply moved by their protest. The documentary presented the Madres as a single social movement as it predated the official split. This happened around the same time that I married my long-time boyfriend. You might be wondering how these two things could be related. Being raised by a single mother who is a feminist and professor of political philosophy, there was a certain amount of apprehension surrounding the prospect of my getting married. According to the view expressed by one family member, “Feminists don’t let their daughters get married.” This seems to be more reflective of people’s beliefs than one might like to admit: one is either committed to feminist goals and adhere to a corresponding worldview, or contrarily, is a pawn of patriarchal domination; and “giving in to the Man,” to put it bluntly. To me, having to swear allegiance to one or the other rang false. Couldn’t these both be important and true in some way?

I got this same strange feeling when I saw the Madres for the first time in that film. Their protest seemed to point to a similar paradox: they were being presented as a mother’s movement for human rights. But when one looks closely at these two “camps” it becomes harder to see how they could be combined. What is going on here? Is it a human rights movement, or a mother’s movement, or both, or in an interesting way, not quite either? I see this movement then, as another challenge to the kind of dualistic “either/or” way of thinking I had encountered in my own life. My research is premised on trying to find an explanation that satisfies my desire for clarification on this paradoxical movement, that is neither in the service of patriarchy, nor is it an outright feminist movement.
1.3.1 My Research Plan: Two Mistakes

I began this research by committing a grave if perhaps common error. I had done quite a bit of reading and came up with a plan for a strongly deductive project consistent with “the model of general science” (Jasper, 1997, p.378). The initial plan was very specific but in retrospect entirely naïve. The goal was to demonstrate that over the past 37 years the Madres had managed to entrench a vision of collective identity that was so progressive and counter-hegemonic that it could be used as a recipe to achieve fundamental and lasting social change. I had a pretty clear idea of what these things looked like and sought to find on the ground the evidence I needed in order to prove my case. I was convinced that upon conducting fieldwork in Buenos Aires, I would discover that there was a veritable army of young people mobilized by the Madres’ perseverance, thus confirming my hypothesis that this new generation not only accounts for the longevity of the movement but would in turn provide a model for activism that results in effective, sustainable social change. And then I did my fieldwork. It confirmed the sneaking suspicion: that the case of the Madres was much more complicated than my utopian hypothesis had wagered, and more complicated than the film had presented. Let me go back for a moment.

Early on in my research I came across something rather odd. There seemed to be several altogether different (and often wholly contradictory) autobiographical and scholarly accounts of who the Madres are, what they are doing, and how they are doing it. The grey areas that started to emerge as I dug deeper into the primary and secondary literature evolved into a large gap that the current project tries to discern more clearly. Something was definitely amiss, I could see traces of it; I just could not put my finger on it. This tension is barely visible, but once I caught wind of it, it gnawed at me, begging for an explanation. The overall aim of this project is to
create the space for that gap to show through, to take up the centre rather than be pushed to the periphery. I will offer an interpretation of what these tensions consist of, what they mean, and why this is significant in terms of our understanding of political activism.

Then came my second mistake: hoping for a simple explanation for this gap, a relatively easy “quick fix” that could ease these concerns. Like most of my generation, we adore quick fixes, relying on them to solve practically any problem that presents itself. But, like all truly complex phenomena, the Madres movement constantly defied simplistic interpretation. It was these perspectives that I had read that on the surface appeared to offer holistic interpretations, but were in fact dubious in their partiality. My fieldwork, rather than resolving this tension, only made it more apparent.

As I stood in the Plaza de Mayo watching their weekly rally as it had taken place each Thursday for the past 37 years (that is over 1900 rallies), I noticed this was not one but two distinct groups; one large and fully-equipped with an enormous banner, flags for everyone, a tent selling wares, and several brand new vehicles recognizable by the emblem of the pañuelo, above which stated in bold print: Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, all in the vibrant national colours. There was no mistaking them. They were also outfitted with the latest technology to record their protest, to amplify their reach and pique the interest of passersby. The other group was tiny and humble by comparison, so much so that I did not even notice them on my first trip to the Plaza. The five or six participants carried a much smaller banner that looked at first to be exactly like the giant blue and white one of their counterpart, but with one small difference: reading carefully I noticed, along with the usual slogans, a slight variation on the name plastered on so many flags, vehicles and other paraphernalia crammed into the Plaza “Madres de Plaza de
Mayo – Línea Fundadora” it read. The two were not acknowledging one another but were obviously hyper-aware of each other, they could be seen speeding up or slowing down to maintain a “safe” distance between their respective groups. It was impossible to know what to make of this “movement” that was clearly not unified, but that was only distinguishable upon close appraisal by an eye keen to pick up on these nuances (many observers in the Plaza remained oblivious to this difference).

It was the superimposition of these various sources and experiences which pointed me to the shadowy areas, the unspoken facets of the movement that are like deep hidden caves. This work represents an effort to jump into this abyss, to “look behind the curtain” at the many mechanisms working behind the scene (Jasper, 1997, p. 41). And so it is very likely that by the end of this thesis instead of explaining the longevity of the Madres as a recipe for lasting social change, the movement will appear altogether more complicated, as will the recipe. In clarifying or resolving certain issues, I will surely pose new ones. If this is the case, I will be satisfied that I have indeed achieved my objective, since sometimes the most meaningful action is not offering a neat resolution to a problem but simply formulating a new question (or an old question more provocatively). Revealing how the Madres might be doing just this is an ultimate aim of this work.

The importance of undertaking this type of research is alarmingly pressing as we face a time of difficult truths and tasks of Herculean proportions. The laughingly lofty and optimistic goals of beauty pageant contestants (“World peace”; “End hunger”) are now more than ever no laughing matter: saving populations from disease, solving world hunger/malnourishment, providing clean drinking water, reducing harmful ozone depleting emissions, lifting nations out
of poverty, eliminating crippling debt to relieve so-called “underdevelopment,” establishing political stability in regions plagued with chronic instability, saving species from extinction, preserving rainforest/tree cover. These are just some of the enormous socio-political and environmental issues that experts insist are quickly reaching a crisis point on a global scale. Never have they been so imminent, but I strongly believe that never have they been so manageable, if only we can re-think our approaches accordingly. This is what V. Spike Peterson had in mind when she described living in a “‘twilight zone’ marked by cumulative dangers and emergent opportunities” (1990, p. 303). According to her, such shifts are “neither avoidable, nor cause for despair,” however, they will “require conscious and critical articulation of a moral philosophy congruent with global solidarity—a moral philosophy adequate to global transformation” (Peterson, 1990, p. 334, 303). The discursive frames we work with to try to understand and respond to these sorts of massive challenges, along with the principles classic moral and political scholars have furnished need to be updated and re-imagined, because it has become evident that much (although not all) of the social change envisioned by classic social movement theorists (women’s, labour, environmental) has failed to be actualized. We have also reached a point where we are able to do this at last; we can look back and evaluate past approaches, take what remains catalyzing and vivid, discard the fundamentalisms and limitations of dualistic thinking, and embrace a truly dynamic complex approach to activism that is reflective of the multiplicity of social realities learned from postmodernism, that reveals underlying power structures unearthed by feminism and political philosophy, and that re-creates and re-centralizes the subject, a method taught us by the tradition of feminist reflexivity. As Peterson (1990) optimistically argues, a shift in approach of epic proportions is needed, but is
certainly not impossible. This thesis works from a position of cautious optimism generated by these approaches.

Looking at the successes of enduring movements like the Madres is a critical component to the study of the potential of activism to foment lasting change, because it is clear that they “got something right.” It is through lessons from the past that I believe, despite the daunting tasks ahead, we can be spurred to come up with fresh ideas and new ways of looking at, and hence tackling, these mammoth problems. As global citizens of the world this is our responsibility, both individually and collectively. It is through asking tough (possibly unwelcome) questions and interrogating taken-for-granted frames of reference that I will begin to reveal the complexity inherent in one of the longest-standing and arguably most important social movements of the modern era, hopefully underlining its significance as a heuristic device that has applicability beyond the national context from which it derives.

1.4 Context: Origins and Overview of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo

The story of the Madres is generally said to have begun around the time of the most recent coup in Argentina that took place on March 24th 1976. Although it was not the first time the country had experienced a military-led coup this period was particularly violent, characterized by widespread enforced disappearance, torture and summary execution of as many as 30,000 prisoners who were kept incomunicado in clandestine torture centers all over

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4 I am reminded of my favorite high school teacher who would proclaim emphatically before handing out an assignment his own adaptation of an oft-cited line from the James Bond film series: “This is your mission should you choose to accept it; you have no choice!”

5 Although the seeds of unrest that gave rise to this fateful event can be traced back much further than this, such a study is beyond the scope of the current work.
Beginning around 1974 (Mellibovski, 1997, p. 48), and peaking during the dictatorship (1976-1983), the military carried out this campaign of terror against the population under the auspices of a “Dirty War” against “subversive terrorists” of the Left (Nunca más, 1986, p. 1). The origin of the Madres movement dates back to this era and has by now reached quasi-mythological status. They are known worldwide as the women who dared to confront a brutal authoritarian regime, demanding the return of their kidnapped children. However, their beginnings were actually quite a bit more humble and rather more the result of happenstance than this grand oppositional narrative suggests. At first their searches were a solitary task, taken up by each mother alone, though sometimes they would be accompanied by a family member, husband or friend. They would go from place to place (police precincts, courts, military headquarters, etc.) asking politely for information on the whereabouts of their children. After a

Investigations initially discovered some 340 such “secret detention centers” across the country (Nunca más, 1986, p. 51), and to date this number has risen to “casi rodeando 600 campos de concentración al estilo Nazi” (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014).

This gave rise to the so-called “theory of two devils” which was hotly debated amongst scholars, activists and the military establishment at the time, and basically provided the justification for the extent of force used by creating the illusion of a dangerous communist guerilla uprising that was threatening to destroy the entire country. This theory was later revealed to be a fabrication meant to justify the use of excessive force and severe repression of opponents of the military junta (Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 1985).

There is commonly held misconception among the general public that the disappeared were mainly young children, which is not at all the case. The majority of those taken (approximately 58%) were between the ages of 21-30 years old (Nunca más, 1986, p. 284) – not young children by any means. And yet interestingly there exists a strong sense (mostly among those not well versed in the history of Argentina during the dictatorship) that the disappeared were babies. This is partly the result of the mothers style of denunciation centered initially on pleading for the return of their “innocent children” which (despite an element of truth) also worked to hide the fact that those taken were for the most part fully-grown adults leading independent lives. This narrative was the result of a societal need to assign blame by classifying the disappeared as innocent victims of unjustified repression (a response to the “theory of two devils” just mentioned). The narrative of the disappeared has recently been reversed, valorizing the disappeared as martyrs and heroes. This is a central aspect of the on-going battle over how Argentines deign to remember and characterize their past. More on this in the final chapters.
time, the mothers became aware that their children, the *desaparecidos*, as they are now known to the world, were likely the victims of state-sanctioned violence. They came to this realization as they began to recognize each others’ faces from their constant searches, and it became glaringly obvious that these were not isolated incidents but part of a systematic plan of repression. And so, in April 1977, about one year after the coup, a group of 14 mothers (H. M. Fraser, 2008), gathered on the suggestion of one of the mothers, a courageous, outspoken woman by the name of Azucena Villaflor de De Vincenti. She proposed banding together, arguing this would make their search efforts more efficient and their demands more effective since a group would be harder to ignore than any single individual (Sternbach, Brizeno & Bonafini, 1987). At this point, the Madres took to one of the main squares in Buenos Aires, the Plaza de Mayo, to raise awareness about and protest the continued absence of their missing children, in the hopes of getting the attention of authorities who could provide help in determining their whereabouts. This square was chosen above all others since it has great cultural significance, being the place where historically political opposition forces go to air their grievances and face off in front of the presidential palace, the *Casa rosada*. Many battles have been fought and protests staged on that very ground, making it the most logical public space from which to launch their appeals.

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9 I will return to the issue of enforced disappearance, as it is a highly contentious aspect of the struggle of the Madres, especially in relation to the application of a human rights frame.

10 Many mothers express this moment of recognition, in which they knew that another woman was a mother of the disappeared too without even speaking to her. They told me of the physical traces of the psychological and emotional pain they were experiencing registering on their faces in a way that was noticeable, and that they could relate to. They had “las mismas caras” as one Madres told me (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014); and that “se reconocieron en la mirada de desesperación que tenían” (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014).

11 Bosco (2001, 2004, 2006, 2007) and others have written much on the subject of the Madres inhabiting the public space, and the significance of this. However, I would argue that even taking into consideration the gendered dimensions at play, given the noted cultural significance of this space the Madres use of the Plaza de Mayo is neither surprising nor novel.
Initially though, they gathered simply to share information—as more of a support network of sorts—rather than as an outright protest activity. Many mothers recall that it was the police who were the ones responsible for the famous rondas, with their order to “¡Circulan! ¡Circulan!” which forced the Madres to circulate the plaza two-by-two, since the dictatorship had prohibited public gatherings making the mothers unable to sit and talk together on the benches that surround the square (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014; N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014; M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014; Programa de derechos humanos).

The movement generally referred to as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo is in fact made up of two totally distinct organizations. The movement split in 1986 into these separate but parallel organizations, with many commonalities—including virtually the same name: Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (referred to by the acronym AMPM) led by Hebe de Bonafini, and Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora (referred to by the acronym LF), but also many striking differences. Interestingly, this split is hardly focused on in writing about the Madres from any discipline, and when it is mentioned it is often only in a cursory fashion, sometimes carrying so little weight that it is relegated to a footnote (D’Antonio, 2006; Pita, 2001, Elshtain, 1996). Among other factors, the closeness in their names has likely contributed to the general lack of awareness of the existence of these separate groups, and to the resultant tendency to refer to the “Madres” as a unified whole, that does not in fact exist.

A great deal has been written about the Madres during the dictatorship period, detailing

\[\text{12}\]\footnote{Despite my disagreement with some of his claims, Bosco (2004) is an important exception to—and confirmation of—this general trend, acknowledging that the split of the Madres is a “relatively unknown fact” (383).}
the importance of their being the only public dissidents of the military regime (Bosco, 2004; Brysk, 1994; D’Antonio, 2006; Foss & Domenici, 2001; Howe, 2006; Navarro, 2001; Thornton, 2000). The Madres themselves have published their own autobiographies detailing these formative years (Bonafini, 1985; Mellibovski, 1997). The focus of much of this literature is on them as a quintessential “motherist” movement, and also a typical “familiares” organization (consisting of family members of the disappeared), or “organismo de derechos humanos,” a human rights organization. Once democracy was re-established, rather than ending their struggle, the Madres maintained and even increased their activism, demanding that the elected government of Raúl Alfonsín reveal the truth behind the disappearances and put to trial the perpetrators. The official response was initially promising, creating a Commission to investigate the offences, the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP), accompanied by exhumations of mass graves to identify victims and the payment of economic reparations to the family members of known victims. Although this strategy is largely in line with the legal precepts set out in international human rights discourse, it was strongly criticized by some of the Madres and eventually brought them into direct confrontation with the government once again (Mellibovski, 1997; Zarco, 2011). This period of democratic transition and consolidation receives the second most attention in the literature, mainly from political science perspectives, which commonly employ political opportunity and resource mobilization theories to explain the emergence and continuation of the movement (Baldez, 2002; Brysk, 1994; Bonner, 2005; D’Alessandro, 1998; Freidman, 2000; Feijóo. 1998; Loveman, 1998; Waylen, 2000). This period is marked by the first major transformations in the framing of the Madres from a collective identity based on motherhood to one based on human rights taking centre stage.
This transformation sparked innovation within the Madres, as it led to both a re-conceptualization of their goals, shifting their focus to prospective/secondary goals, but also resulted in the rupture mentioned above as the tensions within the movement boiled over in response to this new frame. These tensions are the focus of this thesis.

1.5 The Madres: A Paradoxical Movement

There are several “paradoxes” inherent within the Madres movement that have already been identified in the literature (Ortiz Cuchivague, 2012; Pita, 2001; Zarco, 2011), and which I seek to clarify and engage in this project. The first relates to the framing of their protest and demands as an issue of human rights, and the second has to do with their unique construction and propagation of a collective identity based on motherhood. A superficial look at this movement might allow for these two frames to appear straight-forward and (relatively speaking) uncontroversial, but I sensed from my first encounter with the Madres that there was much more going on than these general frames could account for.

To grasp the more intangible components at work in these paradoxes, the affective and normative realms take precedence in my interpretation and analysis, an approach that is consistent with the methodological framework I employ (Foucault, 1980, 1984; Harding, 2004a

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13 I use the word sense here intentionally, as what lies at the heart of my uneasiness—these contradictory features of the Madres—are not the result of something particular and finite that I read or heard or saw (although they are all of these things, too). The source of my inquiry and my continued interest in this research did/does not stem from some tangible, measurable, written or otherwise documented effect, but rather belongs to the realm of affect. Something resonated within me when I came across the inconsistencies I described earlier. I felt that there was something to be learned, a glimmer of something that had not yet been discovered but was most certainly there. I am more interested in what something feels like, and how that emotion is experienced and conveyed through and between people, than I am with those things which can be quantified or described factually, with some sort of rational scientific or empirical certainty.
& 2004b; Haraway, 2010/1988; Hartsock, 2010/1983; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Jasper, 1997, 1998; Melucci, 1996; Noddings, 2010; Ruddick, 1995/1989; Sprague & Zimmerman, 2004). I believe we need to focus our attention on these realms, because despite decades of empirical research on the Madres these other facets have not yet been fully enunciated, leaving out a crucial part of the story. Not only will doing so allow us to make some startling discoveries, it will also enrich empirical thought by giving due consideration to the role of dense emotional layers in the study (and execution) of social movements. Ideally, this will bring scholarship more closely in line with lived reality—bridging theory and practice—and will contribute to an understanding of how the Madres, like many protestors, “shake down our belief systems, interrogating our own intuitions in order to rationalize our own beliefs, principles, even feelings” (Jasper, 1997, p. 376).

The first paradox I identify and investigate in chapter two is related to the manner in which the Madres’ activism does and yet does not fit perfectly well within the human rights frame based on liberal universal human rights discourse, despite their being hailed as “the midwives” of human rights militancy in Latin America (Maier, 2010b, p. 345). The second paradox I identify and investigate in chapter three lies in theirs being at once a typical and atypical “mother’s/women’s” movement. They can be (and have been) seen as upholding patriarchy by harnessing traditional gender roles, but also as extremely transgressive, disputing these same patriarchal roles in a variety of surprising ways. My thesis is that it is as a result of such ambiguities rather than despite them that the Madres effectively bridge what Ray and Korteweg (1999) identify as a major impasse in scholarship on Third World women’s mobilization – dualistic thinking. They are quintessentially non-binary. They demolish dichotomous understanding because their actions and demands simply do not fit neatly into any
single frame. They are women, mothers, and wives who have made the most traditional gender roles their raison d’etre, yet they also pose a formidable challenge to them. Their public spectacles of private pain are also very personal actions against a public atrocity (state-sanctioned enforced disappearance). They have used the language of human rights and motherhood to bring attention to atrocities and violations that otherwise may have remained “sin nombre,” nameless and abandoned like the many unmarked graves of a bygone era, yet they do this by way of particularist and contextualized qualities, the very things human rights discourse seeks to demote under the banner of universalism. They are a contradiction on many levels, making them a fascinating and important group to study.

1.6 Literature Review: Theoretical Approaches to Protest Movements

There are several large bodies of literature that arose in the mid-to-late 20th century that have shaped our understanding of social movements and activism. These come out of a variety of different disciplines but generally can be categorized as falling under one of two “camps.” The first takes a “structural” approach that posits that economic and political dimensions are decisive to theorizing social movements, and the second takes a more “cultural” approach, that highlights cultural dimensions at the root of explanations as to why, how and when people protest (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009, pp. 5-7).

1.6.1 The Structural Approach

The structural camp, also referred to as the “contentious politics approach” (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 38), tends to take a strongly utilitarian view of activism, often implicitly or
explicitly based on rational choice theory. In this view, individuals behaving as rational actors figure prominently and formal political structures take precedence. These actors, it is argued, behaving primarily out of self-interest, will assess a situation by conducting a careful cost-benefit analysis, based on the outcome of which they decide whether or not it is worthwhile to engage in protest activity. Thus, social movements only arise under certain conditions or when a particular set of criteria are met, making it very outward-oriented and heavily dependent on external factors. Resource mobilization and political opportunity (also commonly referred to as the “political process model” [Jasper, 1998, p. 415]) are two of the main theories associated with the structural approach. While the former focuses on the abundance (or absence) of “time and money” that allow for (or restrict) activism, the latter focuses on “opportunities’ provided by the state (such as lessening repression or a division among economic or political elites),” (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009, p. 6) and is defined as, “features of regimes and institutions...that facilitate or inhibit a political actor’s collective action” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 203).

Although such structural analyses have been done for the Madres, complex and long-standing movements such as this one are beyond the explanatory power of these models alone. The longevity of the movement is one of the main reasons that these theories fall short, as political opportunity may offer an explanation for why the movement began (to face an authoritarian state), it would equally conclude that the Madres should never have emerged in the first place. Given the extremely dangerous atmosphere and the real and perceived threats to their lives, one would assumedly calculate the cost of their action to be too high, thereby stopping the movement before it even got underway. Similarly, political opportunity theory would suggest that the Madres movement should have dissolved upon the return to democracy. According to
this line of thinking, the opening of the political arena signaled the end of the need for extra-institutional protest, therefore the Madres could be absorbed into the formal political structure as a legitimate opposition party or interest group. Instead, what we encounter is an increase in their protest and an expansion of the movement as it became more openly accepted and entrenched within the Argentine social fabric as an important source of dissidence. Similar stumbling blocks are apparent in the application of resource mobilization theories to this case. The Madres began under extremely limited resources and continue to experience chronic shortages of critical resources such as time, members, and funds (with the exception of the AMPM more recently, which will be discussed later). According to this theory, such conditions of under-funding coupled with demanding schedules and virtually no expansion in membership would pose a substantial hindrance to the emergence and sustainability of the movement. However, the opposite is true. The outcome instead has been a resilient and long-standing social movement, balking any such predictions and showing again the limits of these approaches in understanding the Madres.

1.6.2 The Cultural Approach

The second camp in social movement theory is the “cultural” approach. This is a throwback to early social movement theory that centralized emotions such as “frustration, anger, alienation and anomie” in explanations of collective behavior but was later cast aside in favor of the “instrumental metaphors” of the structural approaches just discussed (Jasper, 1998, p. 397, 408). James Jasper is one of the preeminent scholars in this area. He elaborates this perspective in numerous edited and authored publications (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2000; Goodwin &
Jasper, 2006, 2009; Jasper, 1997, 1998; Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). It is in his seminal work *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography and Creativity in Social Movements* (1997) where Jasper presents a most thorough case for the centrality of emotion—an important component in his definition of “culture”—to the “art” of protest making. These ‘new’ cultural approaches to the study of activism return to an emphasis on emotion since, “Emotions pervade all social life, social movements included” (Jasper, 1998, p. 398) and affect “whether a movement continues or declines, and when” (Jasper, 1998, p. 405). Jasper argues that instead of viewing it as a liability as many researchers have done, emotional responses need to be taken into consideration because without them “there might be no social action at all” (1998, p. 398). For Jasper, “they [emotions] are relatively predictable, not accidental eruptions of the irrational” (1998, p. 402). And further, “To the extent that they are collectively shaped, depend on context, and are based on cognitions (themselves changeable through learning), they do not appear irrational” (1998, p. 403).

Jasper situates both specific emotions and general affect within the realm of culture, giving them a privileged place alongside “cognitive understandings and moral visions,” and qualifying these as elements of the utmost importance considering that “all social life occurs in and through culture” (1998, p. 403). Scholars in this area then, seek to take stock of the multitude of (inter)personal facets of activism that stem explicitly and implicitly from culture such as: (collective) identity, moral codes, affective bonds, and solidarity. For example, Jasper looks at concepts including: “moral shocks, frame alignment, attribution of blame, injustice, collective identity, cognitive liberation, movement membership and culture, and decline and abeyance,” that have tended to be looked at from a “primarily cognitive” perspective (1998, p. 399),
resulting in “the causal impact of the[se] factors [which] depends heavily on emotional dimensions...hav[ing] rarely been recognized or theorized” (1998, p. 408). This being said, Jasper is not of the opinion that questioning these dominant structural approaches leads to “anything goes,” in this way he circumvents a common criticism of postmodern thought. “That meanings, feelings and even resources and strategies are ‘culturally constructed’ does not mean that they are arbitrary or infinitely flexible. Socially constructed meanings and practices can exert considerable constraint or provide equal room for creativity” (Jasper, 1997, p. 52). He is making a case for the mutual constitution of culture and society. This can be roughly equated to Foucault’s theory of power/knowledge and “disciplinary power” (1980), which sees such social conventions and normative frameworks as imposing limits on human behaviour that lead to self-regulation and remove the need for a centralized enforcement mechanism, but which also create the opportunity for resistance and personal agency (Sawicki, 1994, p. 294). As Jasper goes on to say,

Even if emotions, morals, and scientific facts are socially constructed, even if they are not ‘objectively’ out there...this does not mean that they are a subjective matter of individual choice. Culture is structured and constraining. I cannot believe just anything I wish...[or] I will be dismissed as insane...There are constraints imposed by the distribution of power in society, by organizations with interests in constructing certain emotions, by acceptable kinds of ‘evidence’ filtered from the external world, and by a variety of other institutional and cultural practices (1997, p. 53).

He argues that despite the “postmodern condition...extensive validity testing [still] occurs” and as a result “there are firm pressures on individuals to believe certain things, feel certain ways, and act according to the rules,” although these rules vary depending on the “institutional setting” (1997, p. 54).

Another important scholar in this area is Alberto Melucci, whose book Challenging
Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age (1996), offers an extremely rigorous argument for the importance of emotion and personal relationships to collective action. Like Jasper, he is critical of the flawed logic of structural theoretical approaches, which for him “ignore the motives for, and the meaning and components of, collective action, by assuming that the ways in which such action comes into being and persists over time are irrelevant when compared to the interplay of ‘structural’ variables” (1996, p. 13). This is significant for Melucci because of the way it results in the displacement of the “how” and “why” by focusing on outcomes, or the “what,” of social movements. His book addresses the gap in critical thinking as a result of these preferred foci, for him “how people actually manage acting together and becoming a ‘we’ evades the problematic as it is taken for granted” (1996, p. 15). He argues that this has allowed for the theoretical “liquidation” of collective action as an object proper, and calls for a new theoretical framework through which to study social movements (1996, pp. 13-14).

Melucci’s thinking centers upon learning from the factors inherent to movements themselves rather than the formal structural outcomes or tangible effects of protest actions. He posits that, “Contemporary movements are prophets of the present. What they possess is not the force of the apparatus but the power of the word...They speak a language that seems to be entirely their own, but they say something that transcends their particularity and speaks to us all” (1996, p. 1). He highlights the “potent cultural meanings” that these movements are “entrusted with,” and the manner in which studying them therefore “signals a change in our conceptual universe” by “forcing the revision of dichotomies” (1996, p. 4). Echoing Jasper’s constructionist view, Melucci writes of the postmodern world as “radically transformed...The reality in which we live has in its entirety become a cultural construct” (1996, p. 7). Elaborating on this point, he
speaks of the enormity of the transnational character of society in the information age,
channeling Benedict Anderson’s famous idea of “imagined communities” (1983) while also
highlighting the role of what Jasper calls “culture and biography” (1997) when he writes, “The
planet no longer designates just a physical location; it is also a unified social space which is
culturally and symbolically perceived” (Melucci, 1996, p. 8). He then conflates structural and
cultural approaches, positing that the latter actually contains the former in the global era since,
“the cultural dimension of human existence [is] the core resource for production and
consumption” (1996, p. 8), lending credence to Jasper’s attestation of the difficulty in strictly
separating means and ends in contemporary social movements (or what he would refer to as “the
‘post-industrial’ branch of post-citizenship movements” [1997, p. 7]).

Melucci’s use of the term “codes,” an important part of his analysis and the reason behind
his title Challenging Codes, can easily be interpreted through a Foucauldian lens as a site of
disciplinary power. Melucci writes that, “the key focus of control shifts from the manifest forms
of behaviour to motives and the meaning of action, to those hidden codes that make individuals
and groups predictable and dependable social actors” (1996, p. 8). And further, “In contemporary
systems, signs become interchangeable and power operates through language and codes which
organize the flow of information” (1996, p. 9). For him, these cultural codes function relationally
and at a subconscious level, therefore the study of social movements must look at the biography
of the protestor that is contextually-situated and culturally-rooted. This underscores the cultural
component of movements that finds its expression in both the individual and the collective:
“Analysis cannot simply identify action with that which the actors report about themselves,
without taking into account the system of relationships in which goals, values, frames, and
discourses are produced” (1996, p. 15). He then brings this down to a practical level linked to the abstract underlining how,

the action of movements...becomes intimately interwoven with everyday life and individual experience...Conflicts involve the definition of the self in its biological, affective, and symbolic dimensions, in its relation with time, space, and ‘the other.’ It is the individual and collective re-appropriation of the meaning of action that is at stake in the forms of collective involvement which make the experience of change in the present a condition for creating a different future...Movements are fundamental for the vitality of information societies. The challenge embodied in the movements’ action keeps raising questions about meaning (1996, p. 9).

This comes full-circle, tracing the wider significance of protest activity back to Jasper’s notion of culture as composed of cognition, emotion and morality (Jasper, 1997, p. 48). In this way, we can see how the study of social movements in the contemporary era must look at once at the broadly construed macro level and also at the minutiae of the micro level in order to get at the components that constitute, and are constituted by, underlying power structures, and assess what these might mean in terms of collective action.

1.7 The Dualistic Legacy in Social Movement Theory and Practice

Social theorists condemn the “dualistic legacy” (Melucci, 1996, p. 15) and the “false dichotomies” (Jasper, 1997, p. 57) that have made reductionism ubiquitous in social movement theory (Jasper, 1997, p. 12). Jasper seeks to overcome this by arguing for a “‘both/and’ rather than an ‘either/or’ view of protest’s dimensions” (Jasper, 1997, p. 48). Taking such a view of the Madres movement – in other words that they both exemplify and do not exemplify human rights activism; that they both are and are not a women’s or mother’s movement – will illuminate the ways that they destabilize binaries that have not only been used to understand the Madres but
which have traditionally dominated Western scholarship on society (in terms of roles and relationships) and activism (in terms of social movements and change) in general, such as: individual/collective, emotion/rationality, subject/object, man/woman, feminine/feminist, abstract/concrete, public/private, political/apolitical, particular/universal. As I will interpret in chapter four, they do this by inhabiting both halves without privileging one over the other. This ‘in-between-ness’ demands a re-conceptualization of their goals to uncover the latent ‘subjugated’ questions within. This is analytically complex due to the apparent contradictions it entails, but grappling with these ideas is paramount to grasping the profound significance and meaning of the Madres movement to the Madres themselves which has transformative potential, paving the way for better understanding of effective, long-lived activism.

1.8 Making it Fit: Frames and Framing Practices

It is from within the cultural approach that the important concept of framing social movements was developed. A “frame” is used by a movement to define the presentation or packaging of issues “so that they fit or resonate with the beliefs, feelings, and desires of potential recruits” (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009, p. 55), and as such it is both a highly normative and strategic practice. Frames stretch beyond the recruitment process, and are also a key tool used to garner support and solidarity for a movement or an issue. According to Goodwin and Jasper, “frames are simplifying devices that help us understand and organize the complexities of the world; they are filtering lenses...through which we make sense of the world” (2009, p. 55 emphasis added). Frames also come into play at the individual level (though they remain culturally rooted) and are the source of innocuous “typing” as well as more pernicious “stereotyping” (Jones & Barron,
2007, p. 43). This a common practice that is neither inherently positive nor negative, it is simply something society does. Hall says, “As a tactic we all make sense of the world by referring individual objects, people or events in our heads to the general classificatory schemes into which – according to our culture – they fit” (as cited in Jones & Barron, 2007, p. 34). Because of the potential dangers of essentializing and reification that derive from framing practices though, we should be wary of their usage and remain acutely aware of when, how and why they are employed.

In their study of the Madres movement, scholars often take a cultural approach due to the lack of explanatory power of the structural arguments and they frequently employ frames in their analyses. The use of two frames in particular stands out: human rights and gender identity (specifically motherhood). In the next two chapters I will be looking in-depth at these two frames and their implementation as they relate to the Madres. The analysis of these frames will show that they in fact occult alternative understandings by focusing on a particular set of questions which may not be the fundamental questions at the heart of the Madres’ activism. This will be the substance of the analysis laid out in chapters four and five.
CHAPTER 2 – The Human Rights Frame

Figure 1 – A representation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, displayed in the headquarters of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora.

Figure 2 – Detail of a large painting depicting “Nuestra Señora de la Rebeldía” along with several cardinal virtues, displayed in the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo headquarters.
2.0 Introduction

This chapter endeavours to expose the meanings implicit within human rights discourse in order to evaluate the value this frame adds to understanding of the Madres movement. I will begin by detailing how the movement has been painted as a human rights movement, and how they have engaged strategically with this frame. This will be followed by an overview of human rights discourse as it is conceived in the liberal universal model, highlighting its importance as a prescriptive normative framework. I will then outline a couple of the major correctives to this discourse in terms of gender and power coming from critical feminism and post-structural philosophy, respectively that are helpful in evaluating the Madres’ use of the human rights frame. Finally, I will conclude by explaining how such an investigation is able not only to deduce the logic behind the usage of this frame in the case of the Madres due to its status as a “common currency,” but can also ultimately point to the ways that it is potentially inadequate. Delving into these inadequacies will be possible in chapter four only after the two basic frames have been illuminated sufficiently in chapters one and two.

2.1 The Use of Human Rights as a Strategic Frame by the Madres

2.1.1 In the Literature

The vast majority of the literature, scholarly and popular, considers the Madres to be

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14 It is important to be clear that at the outset of the movement these major critiques to be discussed did not yet exist or were only beginning to be elaborated. Therefore, the very notion that human rights could be disputed was not yet an option when the Madres movement began, making it all the more unlikely that the use of the human rights frame would have been seen as at all controversial. This is not an attempt to criticize retrospectively. There are also cultural dimensions of import here, in that traditional gender roles impose certain limits on women’s behaviour (and hence define the repertoire of approaches to activism available to women in the Argentine context. This will be discussed more in the next chapter when we look at gender identity as a second strategic frame employed by and applied to analyses of the Madres).
human rights activists. They are in fact regarded as a forerunner in the human rights movements that sprang up all over Latin America in the wake of the many dictatorships and military regimes installed over the 1960s and 1970s. Elizabeth Maier, a renowned scholar of women’s activism in Latin America and the Caribbean, goes so far as to call them the midwives of human rights militancy in this part of the world (2010b, p. 345), creating a strong and emotive image of them as attendants at a metaphorical moment of birth, eminently presiding over an historic and watershed moment in history as dutiful caretakers. The Madres are therefore positioned within and described (by themselves and by others), in terms of a human rights discourse.

Although Borland documents the inclusion of human rights language in their slogans, noting their appearance beginning in 1987 (2006, p. 136), human rights discourse framed even their earliest demands. In some of the very first footage broadcast on international news by reporters in the country for the Fifa World Cup in 1978, the Madres are seen pleading for help in the search for their children, evoking in viewers strong emotions of sympathy (connoting compassion and entailing a basic ability to empathize based on a shared sense of threat/vulnerability) and even pity (connoting rather more “feeling sorry for,” entailing a basic inability to put yourself in another’s shoes, indicating an inherent inequality of status/position [Jasper, 1997]). In these and other recordings at the time, the Madres commonly justified their demands by emphasizing the innocence, goodness, and humanity of the victims (their children), therefore placing them as legitimate subjects of human rights that they had been cruelly denied. They also rely here on the sense of duty and moral obligation felt by the international community (read: the powerful West) to intervene when confronted with such obvious violations of many citizens’ most basic rights. Their appeals to human rights underline and augment the anguish of not
knowing whether their children are dead or alive, sick, cold or hungry, and attempt to make viewers feel responsibility toward this problem, stating in no uncertain terms that they are “Nuestra última esperanza.”15

It is easy to see why they would actively engage this frame. It is clear that it is/was useful to them because it is both politically salient and morally praiseworthy. Since being established as an “international hegemon” it has become the language to employ when making political demands (especially of the state). As Donnelly (2009, p. 10) confirms,

[b]y the late 1970s and 1980s, the language of human rights had been reintroduced in most “progressive” political projects. With the collapse of party-state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe and of developmental dictatorships and national security states in the non-liberal Third World, a loosely liberal-democratic vision of human rights has become hegemonic. Today, no vision of political legitimacy systematically incompatible with internationally recognized human rights can hope to be taken seriously internationally. And human rights has become the leading language of resistance in all regions of the globe.

This is especially the case after the 1990s, during which there was a “mini renaissance of human rights fostered by the Vienna conference [which] encouraged unprecedented growth in the engagement of social movements and NGOs with international human rights rhetoric and standards” (Reilly, 2009, p. 29). In this context, such a frame was instrumental in bringing international attention to serious cases of state-sanctioned abuse, using terms that were (and have remained) a highly valued “common currency.” Their first pleas garnered much foundational support from women’s organizations abroad, notably in Canada, Italy, France and Holland (Las Madres, 1985). Also, the Madres succeeded in having their claims heard by the United Nations and Organization of American States (OAS) which prompted an investigation by Tom Farer of

15 Some of these original clips are included in the 1985 documentary Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. One can also be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAP5wlHNPZA
the Inter-American Human Rights Commission in 1979 (Ocampo, 1999, p. 679). What is more, during the administration of US President Carter, Patricia Darian, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights was sent to investigate the claims of the Madres (Las Madres, 1985). As we can see, this frame succeeded in garnering international attention to the issue of the disappearances in Argentina using language that the powerful Western nations could not easily ignore.

In this way, the frame of human rights gave the Madres an important foothold and toolkit with which to make their retrospective demands since their initial protests appear to have hinged on their efforts to find out what had happened to their children. They believed (at first, and for quite a long time in fact) that the disappeared were being held in a prison somewhere, their appeals centered on finding out where they were being held, as well as demanding their release or that they be officially charged following due process. They implemented all the legal measures available to them: filing habeus corpus and missing persons’ reports, participating in various trials domestically and abroad. They held on to the hope presented by these techniques, but that hope faded as time went on. As one Madre attested, “Yo un año presenté otra vez un habeus corpus, para que el estado busque a mi hijo, y como el gobierno no le conviene y no quiere buscar a nadie, me lo archivaron ya dos veces. Pero bueno, sigo. Yo quiero que el estado busque, me diga que pasó con mi hijo” (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014).16 Their perseverance in bringing the disappearances to court and making testimonies provided the necessary legal evidence revealing the widespread and systematic nature of the disappearances, making it clear that it was not isolated but rather had been perpetrated against

16 “One year, I presented again a habeus corpus, so that the State would look for my son, but since it is not convenient for them, and because the government has no desire to look for anyone, they closed my case both times. Nevertheless, well, I carry on. I want the State to look, to tell me what happened with my son.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
many young people from every part of the country. The use of these mechanisms greatly increased their authority, legitimating their testimony in the eyes of Argentine society, and the world.

2.1.2 From the Mouths of Madres

The Madres themselves have continued to embrace this frame differentially along organizational lines. Elshtain notes that the human-rights discourse imposes limits as well as offering benefits, and that those limits come into play to frame and justify the split of the movement. On this divergence she notes that, “The Línea Fundadora is more solidly grounded in human-rights discourse, both in its political orientation and its internal structure. The Bonafini-dominated Mothers downplayed human rights, by comparison, in favor of a more conspiratorial and accusatory language of militancy” (1996, p. 147 n29). In Elshtain’s research, interviewees (mostly founding members of the LF) offered explanations about the split that reflected for her “a classic recognition that human-rights discourse imposes certain responsibilities on its advocates for how they conduct their own affairs, as well as for how they apprehend the wider world of political life” (1996, p. 142). This is corroborated by Steiner (2003), as well as my own research, since there was an eagerness amongst those I interviewed to couch the Madres activism and the work of their respective organizations in terms of respect for democratic ideals more broadly. All participants interviewed were quick to show the democratic internal functioning of their respective organizations, trying to impress upon me their openness and the value placed on equality of members. “Somos todos iguales. Todas nos comprometimos, todas hacemos lo mismo...Nadie más que nadie. Todas tenemos derechos y obligaciones...más obligaciones que
derechos (chuckles)...Todas tenemos derecho a decir lo que pensamos. Acá no es que nos manda” (M. Meroño, personal communication, February 4, 2014). However, the LF offered vastly different view of the AMPM insisting that it is not at all an open institution but is rather decidedly autocratic and giving harrowing accounts of verbal abuse by Hebe de Bonafini against themselves and other Madres who defied her in some way, which are similar to allegations made by Steiner (2003, p. 201). I was told by one Madre that despite winning her first appointment fairly, Hebe de Bonafini rigged subsequent elections to remain President of the Association, which would indeed indicate a shocking degree of totalitarianism on her part (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014). Considering she is the only person ever to serve as President in the entire span of the Association’s existence, such an astonishing feat of unanimity seems highly unlikely, making this allegation seem not all that far-fetched. Mimi described Hebe de Bonafini as “muy agresiva, muy tajante,” “muy violenta” and “intolerante” and that as a result “con las madres de Hebe no se puede hablar” (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014). Mirta described with incredulity the “with us or against us” mentality displayed by the AMPM saying with much sadness and regret, “Yo nunca ví tanto desencuentro con las personas. Con los integrantes de derechos humanos. Nunca...Ahora es como que sos enemigo. ¿Cómo puede ser eso? Yo, honestamente, no estoy de acuerdo en eso. Porque duele” (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014). One interviewee associated with the AMPM also

17 “We are all equals. We all commit ourselves, we all do the same...Nobody more than anyone else. We all have rights and obligations...more obligations than rights (chuckles)...We all have the right to say what we think...Here we are not ordered/told what to do.” (translation K. Laird Barry).

18 “I have never seen so much disagreement between people. Between members of human rights [organizations]. Never...Now, it’s like you are an enemy. How can this be?Honestly, I do not agree with this. Because it hurts.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
hinted that the official rhetoric of peaceful, democratic operation might not be entirely true. While insisting that the University run by the AMPM, the Universidad Popular Madres de Plaza de Mayo or UMPM, is “un lugar de debate, de discusión” he also cited an instance when students of the UMPM attempted to have an open discussion about the differences within the Madres movement and Hebe de Bonafini became enraged. He indicated that this response was not at all unusual because “Acá no se habla de este tema, no es bueno hablar de eso” (M. Aufiero, personal communication, February 10, 2014). Although he is strongly supportive of the AMPM overall, he chose to tell me this anecdote because this “silence” is not something he agreed with on a personal level. The LF, instead, insisted that they are the truly democratic organization, with one Madre stating, “[somos] horizontales. Acá no hay una líder...Acá nadie pueda hablar por nosotros. Y no tendría que hablar, que es distinto...Cada uno, lo que piense, lo que siente” (personal communication, M. Baravalle, February 14, 2014).

In my interviews every participant framed the struggle of the Madres as a rights-based issue, describing themselves as independent “organismo de derechos humanos” thereby associating themselves with the long-standing and well-respected human rights movement in Argentina that pre-dates the Madres’ formation. One of the founding members of the LF asserted,

En realidad fue siempre un movimiento de derechos humanos porque nunca hubo una cantidad fija de madres...Siempre fue un movimiento de derechos humanos que se transformó en asociación ... [Pero] Siempre independientes. Siempre autónomas de cualquier partido político...Muy importante fue eso, muy importante (N. Cortiñas,

19 “We [at the LF] are horizontal. Here there is no leader...Here nobody can speak for us. And nobody is required to speak, which is different...Each person [can have] their own thoughts, their own feelings.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
This issue of autonomy is crucial for members of the LF, who see the struggle for human rights as a starkly political issue that belongs within the realm of civil society—the state in Argentina cannot be trusted to act in accordance with the values and principles of the human rights movement. In this way, there is a tension between the democracy they insist upon on the one hand, and the lack of democracy they decry on the other, which is especially problematic for the AMPM. As Mimi Durán said, “LF es una división porque no querían involucrarse en cuestiones partidarias, no políticas. Cuando vos trabajas en derechos humanos, estás haciendo política pero no es partidaria” (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014). They were eager to show how respect for human rights is a cornerstone of the movement and important point of reference for their activism, saying “nos hemos juntado para luchar por el respeto de los derechos humanos” (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014). One woman, the vice president of the AMPM, referred to the desire on the part of that organization to support equal access to the basic necessities of life saying, “queremos que todo el mundo tiene derechos según nuestra constitución, derechos a la vida, al trabajo, a la vivienda, a la salud y a la educación” (M. Meroño, personal communication, February 4, 2014).

However, the AMPM’s strong support of the current government, justified through the government’s newfound prioritization of human rights, stands in contrast to their rhetoric of

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20 “In reality it was always a human rights movement because there was never a fixed quantity of mothers...It was always a human rights movement that transformed into an association... [But] Always independant. Always autonomous from whatever political party...This was very important, very important.” (translation K. Laird Barry).

21 “LF is a separate division because they did not want to involve themselves in partisan questions, not political questions. When you work in human rights, you are doing political work but it is not partisan.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
being an independent social movement. As well, their insistence on democratic functioning
stands in contrast to the accounts of Hebe de Bonafini’s strong-handed leadership style. The LF,
on the other hand, vehemently oppose any such alignment, arguing that it is not logical, nor even
possible, to fully support the gamut of human rights issues from within the government, since
this entails denouncing violations and by extension denouncing the state and the powers that be.
As Nora Cortiñas stated, “Nosotras [LF] estamos con todos los movimientos de base. Todas las
protestas, de trabajo, de salario, de represión, los movimientos sociales, estamos nosotras. El
grupo que está con el gobierno [AMPM], no. Porque la gente de denuncia, esta denunciando al
poder, al gobierno” (personal communication, February 16, 2014).22 Mirta Baravalle makes a
similar point, saying that she has always seen their role as offering “constructive criticism” that
cannot be done from “the inside” because once inside, “¿A quién reclamar entonces?” (personal
communication, February 14, 2014). Mimi mentions too that despite the official support for
human rights, there are many issues that remain unaddressed by the current government
(personal communication, February 16, 2014). Although for their part the AMPM claim that,
“Las Madres no tenemos partido político, pero sí, apoyamos el proyecto” (M. Meroño, personal
communication, February 4, 2014), it is clear that their alignment goes well beyond merely
supporting a single benevolent “project.” Overall, the Madres as a movement and as individual
organizations through their use of the language of rights and a dedication to democratic ideals
espouse the imposition of a human rights frame, seeing it as congruent with their activism.
However, enough evidence exists to suggest that this position is now in jeopardy. As one Madre

22 “We [the LF] are with all the movements of the base. All the protests, for work, salary, repression, the
social movements, we are there. The group that is with the government [AMPM], isn’t. Because people
that denounce are denouncing power, are denouncing the government.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
put it, “Con este gobierno, o sea en estos diez años, fuimos perdiendo la escala de los valores de esta defensa de los derechos humanos colectivamente” (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014).

2.1.3 Human Rights and the Transition to Democracy: CONADEP and Nunca Más

It is true that as a means of establishing facts, the use of the human rights frame can be seen as effective, especially immediately following the fall of the junta. This is so because, “At the time of transition, the aim was to gather information for immediate use, for knowing the truth of what happened and to use it as proof in the search for justice. The concern was not to create an archive for future history. This memorialistic concern would emerge and display itself years later” (Jelin, 2007a, p. 154). Therefore, it cannot be denied that a great deal of information was gathered about the disappearances as a result of these legal mechanisms and rights-based claims. The data meticulously collected and documented by CONADEP,\(^{23}\) and to a lesser degree Amnesty International when it visited during the dictatorship, allowed investigators to ascertain with “certainty” some “facts” surrounding the disappearances. In Nunca más (1986) the names, dates, and other distinguishing features of some 8,960 cases of disappeared persons are laid out objectively for consideration by anyone interested in knowing “the truth” about the “Dirty War” (Mignone, Estlund & Issacharoff, 1984). These are represented in a variety of media: pictorially in photographs and television programs, verbally through written testimonies and articles, and numerically via graphs and tables, and backed by professionals such as architects, forensic anthropologists, lawyers, and statisticians that give a scientific basis to the facts

\(^{23}\) Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, author of Nunca más
presented therein (Crenzel, 2011, p. 1070). This information thus became widely accessible to the public for the first time, and was presented in such a way that it was accepted as undeniable truth.

Although this work was unprecedented at the time it is clearly lacking in some important ways, that will be made clear in chapters four and five. Ultimately, it is not entirely helpful in terms of understanding the Madres movement, and can “offer only a partial understanding of the Mothers,” despite the fact that “human rights entered into and became constitutive of the political group identity of Las Madres” (Elshtain, 1996, pp. 140-41). Also, the lauded achievements resulting from this frame, exemplified by CONADEP and the military trials, were unable to assuage the Madres as evidenced by their continued protest, at times in direct opposition to these mechanisms.\(^{24}\) A deeper investigation into the contents of the human rights discourse will help to shed some light on why this is the case.

\subsection*{2.2 Human Rights as a Normative Universal Discourse}

What is the substance of this universal human rights discourse with which the literature seems so adamant to associate the Madres?\(^{25}\) Although it was fed from a variety of political and philosophical sources, it is undoubtedly a Western conception. Its origins date back to 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) century Europe, arising from “a particular vision of the political requisites of a life of dignity

\(^{24}\) For a recent and very detailed analysis of the impact of \textit{Nunca más} on Argentine society, see Crenzel, E. (2012). \textit{Memory of the Argentina disappearances: The political history of Nunca más}.

\(^{25}\) Since the long and convoluted history of this discourse is well documented I will give only the briefest of sketches here regarding its genesis, and so while I touch only the facets I see as vital for the impending analysis I am conscious of leaving others aside in the interest of time/space.
worthy of a human being” existing at that time (Donnelly, 2009, p. 6). The 20th century incarnation of human rights discourse which remains in force today is grounded in the rationality of the individual and combines philosophical notions of “natural law” based on an essential “human nature” (Brems, 2004, p. 101). Much of the backbone of this forceful discourse came from philosopher Immanuel Kant. For him, “personhood” is something ephemeral and all persons are equal in principle, regardless of their particular characteristics or traits, meaning that the “moral truth” of their human-ness needs no demonstration of proof but simply exists as a fundamental part of each person deserving of respect and dignity. Kant’s arguments were presented as a direct response to the utilitarian approach espoused by Jeremy Bentham, which Kant saw as dehumanizing in its emphasis on a ‘moral calculus,’ which has as a basic motive the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain (Dr. K. Houle, personal communication, April 22, 2014). Such utilitarian thinking paved the way for several dangerous ideas of biological superiority (social Darwinism, genocide committed in the name of racial purity, etc.), as it provided the justification for obscenities at the collective level in efforts at achieving the best outcome for the greatest amount of people. As such, it facilitates arguments in which the ends supposedly justify the means (such as the murder of a handful of individuals if it will save millions of lives) arguments which are invoked especially during wartime or in hostage situations. Although such thinking is still employed, it lost traction when faced with the persuasive arguments put forth by Kant, with the latter eventually taking precedence in the international and national political arenas. It was during the late 20th century, that the “hegemony of human rights” really took hold (Donnelly, 2009, p. 9). The Kantian notion of rights provided the scaffolding for a universal human rights discourse expressed through policies, treatise and
covenants that had actually begun much earlier with the “Declaration of the Rights of Man” during the French Revolution but culminated in 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and its two (arguably) most important off-shoots: The International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (Lyons & Mayall, 2003). This approach became particularly salient post-World War Two, when the international community sought a moral and political measure through which to guarantee that the atrocities committed during that war by both sides (above all the Holocaust and to a lesser extent the use of an atomic bomb) would not be repeated (Reilly, 2009, p. 25, 40). It also appealed to Western powers who valued positivistic, factually-based, objective ‘hard science,’ since the pseudo-scientific terminology of rationality lends legitimacy to an otherwise rather ‘fluffy’ moral principle. Furthermore, being based on the individual it is compatible with liberal (and later neoliberal) economic approaches that were—and remain—practically gospel in the West.  

This is especially the case in the United States, the unrivaled (until recently) global superpower since the of end the Cold War (Donnelly, 2007), where individualism is a core part of the cultural fabric and the ideas of ‘manifest destiny’ and the ‘American dream’ are widely subscribed. An outcome of this discourse is the reification of scientific rationality as ultimate authority and regulator, providing the basis for one of the main critiques to be examined below. As Peterson observes, “The modern era has been characterized

26 V. Spike Peterson succinctly links the preference for such objective scientific approach to the modern liberal capitalist project, but takes it even further by placing patriarchy as the most dangerously unmitigated component in this tripartite apparatus: “A look at the powerful role of science in the modern era especially reveals the mutual constitution of positivist, liberal-capitalist, and patriarchal world views. However, the central tenets of science—objectivity and rationality—are positivist and liberal abstractions whose privileged status is no longer secure. I believe that we have hardly begun to comprehend the significance of the postpositivist critique of objectivity and rationality, and that our failure to do so is exacerbated by retaining the presuppositions of the third of these mutually constituted world views: patriarchy” (1990, p. 326).
as a shift from the authority of the church/faith to the authority of science/reason” (1990, p. 327).

But how does it perform this function, especially given what Reilly (2009, p. 25) notes are the numerous “tensions between the expansive promise of Kantian ethics and the limits of classical liberalism [which] continue to play out in contemporary human rights discourse”?

Jack Donnelly (2009, p. 1 emphasis added), a leading theorist and vocal proponent of human rights, defines them in this way, highlighting their key features:

Human rights are, literally, the rights we have simply because we are human. They are equal rights: One either is or is not a human being, and thus has exactly the same human rights as every other human being. They are inalienable rights: One cannot stop being a human being, and therefore cannot lose one’s human rights, no matter how horribly one behaves nor how barbarously one is treated. Human rights are also universal rights, held by every human being, everywhere.

This quote gives a good sense of the moral force behind human rights discourse. As a concept it is highly value-laden: in making reference to equality and sameness we are meant to recognize the value of humans above all other species. It is also girded by a strong sense of morality. In determining what constitutes “horrible behaviour” and “barbarous treatment” there is a concomitant ability to judge one’s (and presumably others’) actions as right or wrong, good or bad. Furthermore, this definition makes clear the extent to which human rights are based on validity/truth-claims: claims rest on the ability to assert that one is in fact human and therefore a legitimate subject of these rights. In this way, human rights represent an uncontestable universal “truth.” However, rather than being truly “universal” as is posited, they tend to be interpreted in practice in “highly particularistic ways” (Donnelly, 2009, p. 7) that depend on the definition of “human” used at a given time. To expand on this further, the last part of Donnelly’s definition belies an opposition at work within this concept. There is an inherent duality exhibited in the
phrase “one either is or is not a human being” that is reflective of positivist thinking more broadly. This implies that who is considered a “human being,” is a definitive factor of the legitimacy of human rights claims as well as their application as a moral code. Clearly, the person capable of defining “human” then, is accorded a great deal of power in being able to deem a person worthy or unworthy. Although the position seems to be that the definition of “human” is uncontestable and should be treated as a given in all cases without exception, there is a great deal of evidence that such “exceptions” are common enough. Historically powerful figures and regimes have defined “human” so as to reject and discriminate against a group considered falling outside the “norm,”—be it racial, ethnic, religious, or otherwise—particular humans have consistently been labeled “different/abnormal” and thus outside the purview of human rights. Donnelly himself concedes such a possibility when he mentions that the Classical era definition of “man” arrived at by Aristotle was limited to city-dwelling (male) Greeks (Hellenes) and excluded all those outside the polis as “barbarians” (2009, p. 7; Also see Donnelly, 2007, p. 286). Further, he admits to the limits of universality in practice citing, “National implementation of international human rights norms [that] exclude many from effectively enjoying their human rights,” yet he remains adamant of their necessity as “a powerful critical resource for combating exclusionary understandings and implementations” (2009, p. 10). In this way he confirms that such fears are justified, while seeking to downplay their harm in favor of presenting a more positive appraisal. And so, beyond a brief overview of the shifts in the definition and implementation of human rights over time, there is little consideration given by Donnelly to the real potential for misuse or abuse of this powerful concept. As we can see, the idea of “human” as an objective criterion is not immune to
debate, as it is obviously vulnerable to co-optation by power-holders whose purpose is to inflict harm; and, like any classifying structure, it ultimately has an exclusionary capacity.

Donnelly goes on to attest to the organizational function of human rights in social relations, on the basis of “a distinctive set of substantive values” (2009, p. 2), making it clear that as a normative framework they perform a regulatory function, giving order to the social structure. The discourse is said to provide a sort of blueprint for “the good life;” a set of rules governing ‘good citizens’ behaviour’ according to supposedly deeply held values, which in turn will generate a ‘better (read: law-abiding) society.’ In this way, the focus is shifted from a moralizing framework to an overtly political precedent. This move brings the model further from, not closer to, lived reality, in that it presents a utopia that is quite easily co-opted by power holders who are able to dictate the terms of what constitutes a “better” society to suit their own needs. Peterson comments on this asserting that, “without some prior conception of what constitutes individuals, rationality, or the ‘good,’ it is not possible to derive any moral code” (Peterson 1990, p. 325).

The discourse places citizen and state in opposition, as the state is the body legally obligated to provide certain rights and is the party against which claims are made, giving it
ultimate responsibility in legitimizing claims and rectifying cases of alleged abuse. A troubling aspect of this dialectic is the noted absence of a real role for the collective beyond a conglomeration of individual rational-minded citizens that make up society, but this is neither oversight nor an unintended consequence, as it plays directly into the regulatory function giving power to the state.

Positing individuals as atomistic (entities prior to and comprising social groups) generates an understanding of social relations as necessarily extrinsic and accidental; psychology is seen as more basic than sociology; and groups appear inherently unstable because the interests of their members are unstable. Instability then requires the ‘rule of law,’ actualized through the state, which maintains social order” (Peterson, 1990, p. 311).

However unintentional, the deployment of a human rights frame appears to have a counterproductive effect on the formation of communities, the basic social organization of human beings. As Smith writes,

[t]o view essential moral human nature as separable from social relations is a priori to relegate social relations to a lesser moral status and is to view society as only a collection of autonomous agents...In this way, community, often the expressed goal of moral theories, is contradicted in the social theory and assumptions which many ethicists employ” (as cited in Peterson, 1990, p. 330).

This poses particular problems for theories of social movements since, “this assumption of

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27 According to international human rights law, individuals cannot violate human rights, only a state can be found guilty of such crimes (Donnelly, 2009, p. 6; Pérez Solla, 2006). However, it is also the responsibility of the state to enforce human rights norms, thus putting the state in a compromised position, since it could potentially be both the enforcer and violator. This is a major point of contention that has relevance to the case of the disappeared in Argentina. On the one hand the disappearances have been described as a serious case of systematic human rights violation, potentially even genocide, placing the blame squarely on the state. While the Madres have been at the forefront of pushing for such a distinction, on the other hand they also vociferously demand that individual perpetrators be held responsible (most prominently displayed in their strong rejection of the amnesty laws of Obedencia debida and Punto final, and seen in their continually employed slogans “Castigo a los culpables” and “Carcel a los genocidas del proceso”. The paradoxical position of both seeing the disappearances as genocide, and wanting individuals to stand trial for their role in the crimes, was repeated to me in several interviews. This is reflective of their acknowledgment of the systemic factors involved in the atrocities, without letting individuals “off the hook” for their participation, however “coerced” it may have been. This demonstrates that they see at fault both—and equally—the person and the system.
abstract, individual action is an illusion: both abstract individuals and a moral code separable from all social relations are impossibilities. The glorification of individual agency makes collective action seem less glamorous and less authentic” (Peterson, 1990, p. 330).

Human rights provide a mechanism for an individual human being to claim that which is necessary to live a dignified life conceived as theirs “by right.” The authority of this discourse can be seen to derive from its grounding in rational and individualistic terms, as a valid claim of private ownership (“mine by right”), thereby solidifying an oppositional relationship between state/citizen and the valorization of possessions and/or property that is reflective of a larger shift in modern capitalist society. A criticism put forth long ago by Karl Marx has relevance to the issue at hand regarding the positivism that defines human rights discourse. “Marx argued that the liberal (bourgeois) assumption of ‘egoistic man’ and ‘his individual rights’ was not only inadequate in satisfying the species-need for community, but in fact rationalized a ‘sanctification of property rights’ that entailed sacrificing the concept of justice” (Peterson, 1990, pp. 311-12 emphasis added). What this means is that the concept of justice, taken as a key part of human rights discourse, is in fact somehow being undermined by its own liberal positivist tradition.

Donnelly acknowledges the scientific rationality inherent in this discourse but unlike Peterson he links it to a positive outcome: agency/empowerment. “Human rights...principally regulate relations between individuals, conceived of as citizens, and ‘their’ state. But as rights

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28 This also provides an interesting connection to the Madres in that their demands are viewed as legitimate claims based on their being the mothers, and hence “owners/keepers” of their children. This sets up their children as a sort of property, misstating the relationship between a parent and child according to the capitalist model, and thus gets something very wrong affectively when it comes to understanding the Madres movement. More on the maternal and gender identity frames will be discussed in chapter three.

29 The concept of justice is crucial to the Madres movement and will be returned to later.
(entitlements) they do more than establish standards of political legitimacy. They authorize and empower citizens to act to vindicate their rights” (Donnelly, 2009, p. 3). What he makes clear here is the decisive role that rights play in mobilizing citizens, which is significant, but he makes no mention of exactly how they do this, or the differential access to such “empowerment” that might lead some citizens to be empowered while others are not. The fact remains that the potential for “empowerment” is largely dependent on the power dynamics within a society that influence regulations and shape definitions of “good/bad” and “right/wrong” according to accepted standards. This undoubtedly has an enormous effect on whether and how a concern is voiced—not to mention taken seriously and/or acted upon. These aspects are left unexamined in Donnelly’s analysis. While he acknowledges the potential for power imbalance, writing of the struggles on the part of “the oppressed and despised” to gain political power “usually in the face of violent resistance,” he remains steadfast in his position that human rights have helped change these unequal relations for the better, positing that “over the past three centuries, universal human rights have facilitated the entry [into politics] of many oppressed groups, beginning with the bourgeoisie” (Donnelly, 2009, p. 8). This, however, only serves to underline the point made earlier that the power of the liberal model of human rights, rather than being truly universal, lies firmly within the formal political realm and at the service of a particular group (the bourgeoisie). While his assessment of the force of rights correctly points to their regulatory function as a moral code based on positivist rationality, he stops short of connecting this to social and cultural dynamics that make these intelligible as these are considered to fall outside the bounds imposed by the model. The “realistic utopia” that human rights discourse represents for Donnelly (and presumably other proponents) ultimately plays out in the concrete and local political arena
between a state and its citizens. This frame, which I have claimed is the dominant frame by which the Madres’ activism is analyzed, therefore needs to be understood as subject to the internal limitations imposed by this model, as well as shaped by its interpretation and implementation at a particular time and place, which necessarily inhibits universality and makes it at best only a partial utopia. It will be shown in the next chapter that this is also true of the deployment of a gender identity frame.

Much of the merit of human rights discourse seems to boil down to an acceptance of a set of values which each rational citizen (and hence rational society) deems as inherently worthy and good. However, although this facet of human rights is a part of the liberalist perspective, gaps remain in its proffered explanations in this area. As Donnelly tries to make explicit, “[h]uman rights are not just abstract values such as liberty, equality, and security. They are rights, entitlements that ground particular social practices to realize those values,” and as such their force as demands “rest[s] on our moral nature” (Donnelly, 2009, p. 3 emphasis in original). In other words, they are a means to an end: they are not simply inherently good, valued in and of themselves but can be used instrumentally to realize a desired outcome. This outcome is conceived as a particular set of values that can be attained through moral judgment that goes beyond the purview of what can be rationally calculated, underlining the need to challenge the scientific rationality that human rights discourse upholds. Note too that neither the definition of these values nor the substance of this “moral nature” is up for debate. As Peterson writes, “[t]he tendency is to adopt as essential those transhistorical or universally human properties that are, in fact, historical and contingent. The claim of abstract universality then masks the inescapable particularity and contingency of the properties assumed” (1990, p. 313). It is taken for granted
that everyone has the same conception of what constitutes these significant values, such as “liberty, equality, and security,” not to mention “truth” or “justice,” when these are in fact nebulous, highly abstract principles that are quite difficult to define. Taking it to the extreme, this view assumes that every individual in a society holds identical definitions simultaneously and at all times, thus forming a coherent set of values. This is clearly a preposterous supposition that mistakenly attributes to society a static quality which it surely does not possess. Although Donnelly does not quite do this, attesting to the dynamic quality of culture and hence the contested nature of “socially constructed meanings” from which human rights discourse is formed (2009, p. 11), neither does he fully take stock of what this revelation entails for the formulation of rights as a moral code. That such values are at the heart of human rights, as Donnelly himself suggests, makes of them a highly disputable normative terrain rather than the straightforward *modus operandi* for citizens to achieve “the good life.”

### 2.3 Critiques of Human Rights Discourse

#### 2.3.1 Feminist Critiques

Despite rigorous defense of the human rights model by some (Donnelly, 2004; 2007 & 2009; Howard-Hassmann 2011a & 2011b; Kateb, 2011), recently it has been the subject of criticism by scholars looking to reveal its “blind spots,” mainly with a view to improving rather than rejecting it altogether (Lyons & Myall, 2004, p. 4). Some of the most significant critiques of this model have come from a critical feminist perspective, and are based on human rights

30 It is unclear why Donnelly does not categorize *justice* as a value on which grounds human rights-based claims may be made, as it figures prominently among human rights activists (especially so amongst the Madres) as one of the most incontestable of shared values, which cannot be reduced to a “laudable idea,” as he suggests (2009, p. 3).
discourse being a site and source of the continued domination of women by upholding hegemonic patriarchal structures and privileging a masculine Western developmentalist worldview (Arat, 2011; Chaterjee, 2004a & 2004b; Escobar, 1992; A. S. Fraser, 2001; Gaier, 2001; Geske & Bourque, 2001; Hertel 2011; Mantilla Falcon, 2009; Merry, 2001; Peterson, 1990; Reilly, 2009; Schild, 1998; Stephen, 1995; Vargas, 2010; Zoelle, 2000). These perspectives hold that “building bottom-up, transformative approaches to human rights – especially from a gender perspective – requires the deconstruction and redefinition of several entrenched modes of thinking and practice that perpetuate the exclusions of mainstream human rights discourse” (Reilly, 2009, p. 29-30). For instance, the positivistic language and logic that the discourse promotes are shown by these scholars to underpin the oppression of women, “[g]iven the prestige accorded science and objectivity, an important consequence of the masculine:objective:scientific association is a powerful and pervasive devaluation of the feminine:subjective:empathic” (Peterson, 1990, pp. 326-27). The main point that these scholars take issue with is the implicit bias within the liberal framework toward a masculine perspective, what Peterson calls a “male-as-norm orientation” (1990, p. 305).

K. P. Parsons argues that the ‘main bias in moral philosophy for two millennia’ has been that ‘the moral-social world has been taken to be the world as men know it. A meaningful (or a ‘good life’) has been a life seen from the perspective of males and open only to males—and in fact, only to higher-class white adult males, so that the bias is classist and racist as well as sexist” (as cited in Peterson, 1990, p. 338 n38).

Also at issue is the attempt at correcting this bias through the use of a gender-neutral “human” subject (Brems, 2004), which has led to the equally pernicious “androcentrism of our theory and practice” (Peterson, 1990, p. 306). For Peterson, the result of this is something even more difficult to combat because it is a subtler means of discrimination, masking patriarchal
structural violence with neutrality. Peterson devotes significant energy to the demonstration of the inadequacies of the liberal positivist model of human rights in an article entitled “Whose rights? A Critique of the ‘Givens’ in Human Rights Discourse” (1990). In it she takes a postpositivist feminist perspective to show how, “the model’s givens have served to defer, silence, or render invisible alternative understandings of moral philosophy” (1990, p. 318), specifically critiquing the following components of the human rights model: 1) the presumed universality of Western experience, 2) abstract liberalist premises, privilege of universalist precdural rights over concrete particularist realities; and, 3) individualistic component: conception of individual autonomy marked by reason/rationality (1990, pp. 309-12). She argues succinctly that the human rights model inherited from Kant works to exclude women from the definition of “rational human being” (1990, p. 314), upholding the notion of biological reproduction as the single most important purview of the “emotive irrational” gender “thereby consigning women to a restricted ‘family’ domain” and in this way, “[g]ender differences are reified in establishing a set of social dichotomies” (1990, p. 315). 31

Advocates of women’s human rights conceive of two possible adaptations of the model based either on a “sameness” or “specificity” approach; the latter having two distinct options: creation of special rights for women (dubbed a “flexibility” approach), or a feminist transformation of all human rights (called either “gender mainstreaming” or “inclusive

31 More on this in chapter three.
universality”) (1990, p. 104, 110; Gaier, 2001). One of the most promising voices from this last approach comes from Reilly, who promotes a decidedly radical “cosmopolitan feminist engagement with human rights” that has enormous transformative potential in the way it re-envision human rights as a “participative, dialogic process – grounded in the idea that the content of universal human rights must resonate with the concerns of, and be defined by and with, concrete, situated women.” This vision for women’s human rights “seeks to integrate the moral, legal and political elements of human rights into a framework of critical, bottom-up action” (2009, p. 11). Further, this “dialogic process of negotiating the meaning of human rights in a specific context consists, simultaneously, of universal and particular moments” (Reilly, 2009, p. 37). Despite the promising aspects of these approaches, each tries in one way or another to work women into the existing structure, rather than proposing a wholesale re-structuring / rethinking which is advocated by philosophers and critical theorists in the poststructuralist camp.

2.3.2 Post-structuralist Critiques

Another fruitful critical lens through which to look at human rights discourse is provided by poststructuralist thinkers, above all the work of Michel Foucault (1980, 1984) is helpful in this endeavour. This epistemological tradition seeks to deconstruct hegemonic institutions into

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32 The mainstreaming of women’s rights that began with the United Nations Decade on Women (1975-85) culminated with the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 (Cosgrove, 2010, p. 6). Since then, women’s rights have occupied a central place in the international arena (Naples & Desai, 2002, p. 174). This mainstreaming meant that for the first time intellectual attention was finally paid on a global scale to the fact that women’s rights are human rights, thereby allowing women’s movements to situate themselves within a universal human rights framework that is extremely salient (Kaplan, 2001, p. 192). This paved the way for the creation of important policy in the 1990s which is explicitly meant to protect women, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) ratified by 131 countries in 1995 (Naples & Desai, 2002, p. 174).
their composite building blocks to seek the truths inside; to expose the structures inherent to all meaning, thinking, and practice that we generally take for granted, to unearth the meaning-making work that goes on behind the scenes of all social life. Peterson describes this type of analysis as both, “deconstructive (revealing falsehoods and exposing contradiction,” and “reconstructive (attending to the alternatives implied by the critique)” (1990, p. 318). A basic premise of Foucault’s *Power/Knowledge* (1980) is that the site and sources of *power* and *knowledge* have shifted in the modern era, and that they are mutually constituting inseparable terms (pp. 51-2). There has been a change in the scale, form and function of power such that traditional sovereign power (of the sort exhibited by monarchies and religions) has been superceded (although not entirely replaced) by its “antithesis”: a “non-sovereign, disciplinary power” (1980, p. 104). Explaining the link between the two in terms of an organizing principle, he posits that: “[t]he juridical systems—and this applies to both their codification and to their theorisation—have enabled sovereignty to be democratised through the constitution of a public right articulated upon collective sovereignty, while at the same time this democratisation of sovereignty was fundamentally determined by and grounded in mechanisms of disciplinary coercion” (1980, p. 105). As such, disciplinary power is expressed most visibly in the state apparatus, modern medicine and the legal system, but is also at work in much more subtle forms that are harder to discern which he calls “infinitesimal elements” or “micro mechanisms” (1980, p. 99, p. 101). Put in plain terms, while it seems that sovereign tyrannical systems of power are a thing of the past, having been replaced by systems such as human rights which seem to guarantee freedom and security in a new way, what Foucault is suggesting instead is that some kind of tyranny or coercion still exists and thrives within these new ‘democratized’ systems, and
furthermore that people are active, almost willing participants in this coercion. As he clarifies, “in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). As we can see, an important characteristic of this form of power is that it works on an individual level, allowing people to self-regulate, and hence reducing the need for overt shows of force by an authority figure. It is through norms of thinking that social control has been internalized by citizens who actively participate in their own oppression by submitting themselves (often unconsciously) to disciplinary power. In this way even seemingly benevolent discourses and ideologies can have a negative atomizing impact on society.33 In addition, unlike the way human rights discourse atomizes individuals, a Foucauldian approach can make a strong case for the positive aspects of power as well, seeing individuals as capable of harnessing power in an interesting way. This can be seen as a theory of agency, an integral component of all social mobilization. In his view,

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in doing so subdues or crushes individuals...The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. This individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (1980, p. 98).

What is more, according to Foucault resistance is inherent to the exercise of power, as he argues that there is an implicit yes/no in power that is a legacy of sovereign power that, although harder to discern now than before, remains active. This is what gives rise to the opportunity to resist, to

33 Negative impacts can be overt or covert, but both are equally pernicious. The impacts of viewing the Madres through a human rights frame results in some rather covert impacts which will become clear in chapters four and five.
say “No!” (1980, p. 61). This different way of conceptualizing resistance on an individual level is useful to keep in mind when thinking about the case of the Madres, because they exhibit a complexity that may be more easily captured by such a nuanced view than by a perspective that sees them as a collective of like individuals either being squashed by the state or exercising some sort of unified, identical resistance to it.

This is related to one of the main issues at the heart of human rights discourse: morality. Where earlier it was demonstrated that Donnelly (2007) believes that the creation of universal normative codes for behaviour serve as an emancipatory force for the betterment of all of society, Foucault conceptualizes these codes as non-emancipatory, and furthermore of enabling the bourgeoisie to take advantage of a newly created apparatus of power to maintain their status and privilege: “[h]ow was this wealth to be protected? By a rigorous morality, of course: hence the formidable layer of moralisation deposited on the nineteenth century population” (1980, p. 41). It is for this reason that for Foucault, “moral ideology, just like the forms of justice operated by the bourgeois apparatus, must be submitted to the scrutiny of the most rigorous criticism...” (1980, pp. 35-6). His analysis of power holds special promise for the study of social movements and the Madres in particular since he offers a more nuanced and complex view of power as both a positive and negative force than is possible through theories based on instrumental rationality (1980, p. 119). Also, his argument for a more critical assessment of how the discourses of power operate have special import for thinking surrounding collective action and protest, since he challenges that what is “right” and “good” is necessarily somehow below the level of power or completely obvious. Rather, these are always linked to state power struggles, with the recommended “moral order” or “moral principles” often implicitly acting in ways that serve
these interests.

Taken together, this thinking makes a valuable contribution to the analysis of any discourse but of human rights in particular because as we have seen despite being an area ripe for contestation because of its value-laden moral component it is one of the least disputed hegemonic normative structures. Postpositivism can make a similar contribution by, “reject[ing] the fact-value dichotomy, insisting instead that all knowledge claims are embedded in socially constructed systems of shared meaning and shaped by social and political context” (Peterson, 1990, p. 324). This is especially aimed at the “legal positivism” of human rights discourse that “promotes deference to the authority of legal experts who are constructed as objective interpreters of the ‘Truth’ of the law” (Reilly, 2009, p. 38). Foucault makes a parallel theoretical move when discussing the importance of truth,

There is a battle ‘for truth’, or at least ‘around truth”— it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean ‘the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted’, but rather ‘the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true’, it being understood also that it’s not a matter of a battle ‘on behalf’ of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays. It is necessary to think of the political problems of intellectuals not in terms of ‘science’ and ‘ideology’, but in terms of ‘truth’ and ‘power’ (1980, p. 132).

This “régime of truth” is a central aspect of his theorizing on power/knowledge which provides a solid basis for the deconstruction of the liberal human rights discourse: “It is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates” (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). As Peterson (1990, p. 307) elaborates,
The model of human nature—the ‘is’—currently predominating is characterized as ‘Western,’ ‘liberal,’ and ‘individualist.’ The preferred state of human affairs—the ‘ought’—is identified with the normative objectives of international human rights discourse. The operative worldview is identified as (implicitly) positivist...These challenges [posed by contemporary philosophy of science] in turn have significant implications for both the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ presupposed in human rights discourse. Yet the human rights literature rarely addresses ontological and epistemological problems generated by the need to move beyond positivism. I believe that a continued reliance on positivist understanding impairs our struggles for global solidarity.

One might be wary of critiquing human rights given the apparent improvement this regime of moral and political principles makes over previous ones. However, wariness should not stop one from asking questions, from trying to see the ways that this discourse might not actually be better than the systems we like to think it replaced. On critique in general Foucault makes the following point, “A critique does not consist in saying that things aren’t good the way they are. It consists in seeing on just what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based...To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy” (Foucault, 1981, p. 456). The goal of criticism can therefore be seen to reveal “subjugated knowledges,” which he defines as “the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functional coherence or formal systematisation” (Foucault 1980, p. 81). Foucault links this to a refutation of positivist thinking through what he calls a “genealogy,”

in contrast to the various projects which aim to inscribe knowledges in the hierarchical order of power associated with science, a genealogy should be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and

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34 One of the “negative impacts” of systems of disciplinary power mentioned above is that the ‘subjugated knowledge’ of the Madres movement is rendered invisible when looked at through either the positivist human rights or gender identity frames, because they focus on rational, instrumental goals instead of affective, intangible potentially unintelligible aspects. This will be explored further in chapters four and five.

Foucault also links critique to resistance, arguing that it is not a formula for change but rather a practice in resistance, “Critique doesn’t have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes: this then is what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is...” (as cited in Kuhn, 1997, p. 403). In a similar vein, Peterson (1990, p. 304) writes for the purpose of exposing the assumptions about “human nature” underlying human rights discourse (among other scientific, economic and political models) with a view to “permitting more accurate—and therefore more adequate (and potentially emancipatory)—understanding of moral theories, economic relations, and ‘ways of knowing’.” “[T]he real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them” (Foucault, 1984, p. 6). There is perhaps no institution that appears more neutral than human rights. Poststructural and postpositivist theories imbue critique itself with an emancipatory function that can bring into view the myriad connections between social movement theory and human rights discourse. We can see how the notions of truth, power, and knowledge are intimately bound up within discursive thought and practices, to the extent that discourses such as human rights must be scrutinized to be better understood and possibly to be more effective political tools. Also, it is possible to see from this angle that the “face value” attached to human rights become meaningless without proper critical contextualization.

To date however, little work has been done to expose human rights as a potential form of disciplinary power. This is partly the product of a tradition of strict separation of disciplines in
academia, which has kept separate the work done in different areas of scholarship, creating a barrier to innovative, cross-disciplinary thinking. As such, social movement theory remains firmly planted in strongly positivistic fields of sociology, political science and political economy, and so—with some important exception from critical theorists such as Melucci and Jasper—there is little cross-pollination happening between theirs and the parallel work of (de)constructionists, feminists and the many post- (positivists, modernists, structuralists). If combined, these could contribute significantly to the understanding of social movements.\textsuperscript{35} My hope is that this will be true too in showing something not yet seen or understood about the Madres, but this involves challenging reified understanding of what this movement is. As Peterson notes, “[m]oving beyond the limitations of positivist rationality requires accepting the complexity of postpositivist understanding and the necessity of ongoing critique” (1990, p. 328).

\textit{2.4 The Continued Hegemony of Human Rights: Some Implications}

Feminist and post-structural academic critiques notwithstanding, there still seems to be relatively widespread acceptance and continued validation of human rights as an inherently progressive discourse (along with other “untouchables” such as democracy and development). Although it has been shown that this discourse implies certain assumptions about humans which are based on narrowly defined ideas of rationality, autonomy, and universality that are linked to patriarchy and capitalism and are hierarchically euro-, western-, and homocentric, they remain

\textsuperscript{35} There is clearly a paucity of scholarly work in social movement theory drawing from the rich philosophical repertoire of Foucauldian thought. Of the 200+ sources I consulted for this work on women’s human rights, activism and social movements in Latin America, a cursory glance through their indices and bibliographies revealed a scant few references to the work of Michel Foucault (less than two dozen) and only a handful in which his theories were actually utilized in their analyses, as opposed to cited briefly as an “influential thinker.”
largely in use. These must be seen as part and parcel of a system of power—albeit not explicit, but one that is equally capable of domination as it is emancipation. And yet the usage of human rights as a supposedly value-neutral discourse predominates. However, I am not suggesting that we ought to reject the concept of human rights entirely. The acceptance of “women’s rights as human rights” was hard won and should undoubtedly be counted as a major breakthrough for the emancipation of women globally (Kaplan, 2001). But, despite steps in the right direction, there remains a pressing need for social science scholars to become more cognizant of their role in the perpetuation of a hegemonic discourse and the dangers posed by continuing to subscribe to these visions rather unthinkingly, taking their benevolence as a given instead of critically engaging with them to discover their more subtle implications. This is especially noticeable in the areas of social movement theory and practice which frequently employ human rights frames without due consideration of the underlying structures this legitimizes. However latent and seemingly innocuous, these need to be recognized as the same structures that critical feminist scholars like Peterson and post-structural philosophers such as Foucault have gone to great lengths to expose and critique.

2.4.1 Enforced Disappearance and Human Rights Discourse

A thorough investigation undertaken by Pérez Solla (2006) into the applicability of the human rights model to cases of enforced disappearance represents an effort at evaluating the

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36 Efforts in this regard have not made much progress since Wiarda first attempted to initiate such a conversation back in 1980 writing on the need to re-define human rights discourse, especially when applying it to Latin America in an article entitled “The struggle for democracy and human rights in Latin America: Toward a new conceptualization” in The Continuing Struggle for Democracy in Latin America (pp. 231-254).
purchase of human rights discourse on specific cases of abuse, what Jack Donnelly might call an
investigation of the “international legal universality” of human rights exhibited in the law (2007,
p. 288). Tellingly, after an exhaustive analysis of case law from the Inter-American and European
Courts of Human Rights, Pérez Solla comes to the surprising conclusion that the model as it
stands is not at all sufficient in fully addressing such claims. She argues that as a result many
claimants remain unsatisfied even once the process has concluded and “justice” has been done.37
This is a strong piece of evidence confirming my assertion that regardless of the intentions
behind their engagement with this frame, the Madres will necessarily be left wanting if they
continue to rely on human rights mechanisms for the resolution of their demands, especially
when these are conceived of in narrow legalistic terms. Ocampo (1999) makes a parallel claim
when he insists that a strong civil society and truly democratic institutions are the components
that will allow for justice in cases of atrocities such as occurred in Argentina, further underlining
the need to widen conceptions of human rights from their overly instrumental hollowed out
interpretation in order for it to become an effective discourse *de facto* and not simply *de jure*.

2.5 Beyond Human Rights or A More Human Human Rights?

By all accounts, the Madres are a movement “for” human rights—one that in fact helped
to shape the contours of this discourse in the region and one that was shaped by it in turn. Above
it was demonstrated exactly what this has enabled in terms of their global reach and national
significance. Now, though, the task is to begin to outline what this may also be preventing. For
an organization to be viewed as “in the service” of a discourse—even one as seemingly

37 More on “justice” in chapter five.
benevolent as human rights—implies the tacit acceptance of the main tenets of the discourse. As we saw, discursive framing is a simplifying method which allows certain features of a movement to remain front and centre, while relegating other important features to the periphery, beyond the grasp of outsiders interpreting the movement, and perhaps even beyond the grasp of the movement members as they are equally susceptible to the reductive power of framing. In effect, framing the Madres in this way necessitates that some key aspects be allowed to slip below the surface, potentially out of view to both outsiders and insiders—to the Madres themselves.

In framing their demands as rights-based claims, the Madres made a strategic choice which garnered them unforeseen and invaluable support and legitimacy, but what fewer people know is that it also seems to have set in motion a crippling reduction in the parameters of the movement’s goals. This “crippling reduction” is in fact the problematic of this thesis. Although this frame was largely responsible for the legitimization of the “cause” of the Madres, defined in terms of the search for the disappeared and the restitution of their “human rights,” it also closed off the possibility of probing deeper into the issue in different ways. By effectively limiting the scope of inquiry the human rights frame in its liberal universal form failed—and continues to fail—the Madres in a fundamental way by falsely separating the Madres’ demands into primary/retrospective without due consideration for the interconnections between these. The exact nature and repercussions of this will be dealt with in chapters four and five.

For human rights to be a viable frame for this movement it would need to be expanded to encompass a much wider conceptualization that is more or less consistent with the gender mainstreaming approach taken by Reilly (2009, p. 43) that seeks a much more “substantive realization of human rights” than is currently on offer. This is the perspective one can arrive at
through combining critique of liberal human rights discourse with a closer attention to the inner
dynamics of the Madres as agents of social resistance and change, and appreciation of the
linkages this can foment on global and local scales. Feminist scholars call for this sort of
alternative more nuanced view of human rights that takes into consideration the dynamism and
complexity of social relations in the era of globalization. Cosgrove describes such as an
expanded conceptualization of human rights as inclusive of a breadth of “human security
issues” (2010, 195). This idea is at the heart of Evan’s article in which he proposes a means of
operationalizing this idea by “thinking locally” but “acting globally” (2000, p. 231). A prominent
forum of third world women, the Diálogos feministas puts it this way: “The point is not to
‘privilege’ either the particular or the universal, ‘but to universalize our visions and goals as
women’s movements’” (as cited in Vargas, 2009, p. 160).

It is only by looking closely at the Madres’ use of this frame that we can clearly see some
of the real challenges it poses to the liberalist positivist vestiges that lie within, and thus make
room for a different iteration of human rights discourse, putting into practice the simultaneous
processes of “deconstruction” and “reconstruction” that hold great potential for global solidarity
(Peterson, 1990). Many scholars have already indirectly pointed to this as a significant aspect of
the Madres’ sustained activism. For instance, Kaplan interprets this as “new vision of politics
[for] universal social transformation...a new ethical order” (2001, pp. 192-94). It is in this way
that the Madres could be said to have fostered the elaboration of a potentially entirely “new
genre of human rights” (Malin 1994, p. 188). But even more than this, it hints at the real
possibility that the Madres themselves have in some ways been working toward a re-
conceptualization of human rights of the sort which postpositivist feminists proclaim is long
overdue (Peterson, 1990). In other words, their importance as a social movement can be seen not just in terms of the claims they made against the Argentine state but in terms of how they evolved political and moral principles. Their broad vision holds greater significance when looked at in this light. It could be argued—and I am—that the Madres, much like the feminists Peterson discusses, “are not just rejecting ‘naive abstract individualism’—a model many agree is indefensible. They are articulating an understanding of human beings that challenges the orthodox model at a deeper level...What is at issue here is the problematic nature of social interaction: that meaning is simultaneously mutually constituted by participants” (1990, p. 329). She concludes that “[w]ithout social context, individuals, mental states, and meaning are unintelligible categories,” (Peterson, 1990, p. 330) making clear the need to look beyond the human rights frame to get a more complete picture of the Madres’ activism.

As a result of this broadening, the Madres have over the years begun to support a wide array of social and political causes, which is characteristic of women’s movements more generally (Whittier, 1995) as they undergo “a shift from micro to macro, from protest to proposal” (Fals Borda, 1992, p. 305). Such a shift on the part of the Madres has been well documented (Borland, 2006; Burchianti, 2004; D’Alessandro, 1998; Steiner, 2003). In her book Hebe’s Story: The Inspiring Rise and Dismaying Evolution of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (2003) Steiner makes some shocking allegations in this regard. She is highly critical of the revolutionary Marxist-inspired “Left turn,” which she attributes entirely to Hebe de Bonafini’s strong-willed leadership, seeing it as discrediting the Madres’ good name by embracing radical communist/socialist ideology that condones violence. Although I was highly suspicious of an account that appeared to be a one-sided attack on an individual, granting what seemed godlike
power to a single person and crediting her entirely with shaping the movement, this view was indeed largely corroborated in my fieldwork. I witnessed in person the fiery fervor of Cuban-style Marxist-inflected political rhetoric utilized by Hebe de Bonafini, and the control she has over the organization’s interactions with outsiders. Furthermore, several interview participants recounted alarming anecdotes substantiating Steiner’s claims of the highly aggressive and divisive tactics of this perennial leader, hinting to abuse of power, intimidation, corruption, fraud and dammingly partisan political affiliation. This lends credence to my claim that the split in the movement is very important, as it set the two organizations on very different—frequently opposing—paths, which broad labels such as “human rights activists” hide.

Ironically D’Alessandro writes how, “Las Madres transformaron la causa de los Derechos Humanos en vanguardia de las luchas contra todo el sistema de dominación” (1998, p. 44), however; her use of “Human Rights” here continues to bestowed upon them this title without much-needed critical reflection on the potential role this frame itself plays in a system of domination which the Madres are credited with affronting. Borland (2006) systematically traces the broadening of the Madres’ struggle over time, which has most recently taken aim at neoliberal policy reforms as the latest “contemporary injustice” perpetuated by the state. Although her analysis offers a plausible explanation for their longevity by documenting their adaptation over time, which allowed them to maintain relevance, her argument has some critical oversight. She remains within the confines of an instrumental human rights frame by painting the Madres as a coherent social movement mainly opposing the state. Taking this further, she fails to put these adaptations into a broader context of the Madres’ secondary/prospective goals characterized by their slogan “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia,” which has some important
connotations yet to be discovered. As well, in her eagerness to demonstrate the “newness” of their contemporary activism she ignores the crucial fact that they have only ever supplemented their protest with these expanded demands, while maintaining a core of their original goals/demands related to the disappeared, for example: for the AMPM, “¡Hasta la victoria siempre queridos hijos!” and, the LF: “30.000 Detenidos-Desaparecidos. ¡Presentes! ¡Presentes! ¡Ahora y siempre!” and “¿Dónde están?” Borland’s focus on the Madres’ slogans (including her categorization of these) leaves much to be desired in that they represent a tiny cross section used only at one annual event, and are not directly attributed to either the LF or the AMPM (leaving us once again to assume a false unity within the movement). Further, slogans are by definition a rhetorical device adapted from social marketing and used by movements to persuade public opinion and as such often entail framing the issue with a propaganda-like simplicity that highlights a particularly hard-hitting issue using “hot-button language to trigger a one-shot response” (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009, p. 170) at the expense of other important concerns or demands that constitute a movement (especially one as complex as the Madres). Gandsman (2012), Risley (2006), and Petras and Veltmeyer (2011) with a vested interest in issues of class, endeavour to make explicit the connections between the Madres’ protest and economic inequality resulting from neoliberal globalization. While such class-based perspectives can be a hindrance (for reasons made clear by Steiner), these studies do take a broader angle lens to look at the Madres in terms of their opposition to systemic injustices—a key feature of my analysis and one deserving of more attention than it has received to date. Borland (2006) points out importantly that the Madres’ transformations imply a linking of old and new rather than a substitution of one

38 More on her study of slogans in chapter four.
for the other, emphasizing the continuity of the movement.

To write about the Madres as a human rights movement without making these discursive distinctions and outlining their practical implications according to the insights above does them an injustice, as it is not consistent with the complexity of the movements’ goals, nor as I see it, the Madres’ own personal morals and values. Rather, the Madres movement clamors to offer an important corrective—one that has yet to be fully enunciated, but that paves the way for societal “recognition of dynamic autonomy within a just system based on the narratives of lived experience [which would] constitute a state in which women (and men) may experience well-being and mutuality” (Zoelle, 2000, p. 120), or, put differently, “the search for autonomous identity, pluralism, and the right to difference” (Calderón, Piscitelli, & Reyna, 1992, p. 33). This broad moralistic reconfiguration of rights has been at the centre of much recent social mobilization in which “activists try to build ‘civil societies’ based on the values of solidarity, public truth-telling, ideological pluralism and non-violence” (Glasius, 2012, p. 362). Kaplan (2001, p. 195) sums up the significance of these interrelated social transformations when she writes,

The call for human rights is not merely a shift in rhetoric; rather, it represents a groping toward an ill-defined but increasingly visible alternative social and political formation. Probing the meaning of human rights in the present context of grassroots movements points to the relationship between survival and the promotion of a new set of social relations and political institutions.

It can be seen that postpositivist and poststructuralist thinking indeed offers the best method to achieve the “alternative social and political formation” to which Kaplan refers, Peterson underlines what it might mean should this call not be heeded,

If we accept, as I believe we must, the postpositivist understanding that all shared
systems of meaning are social constructions, we are compelled to surrender the ‘ease’ and efficiency of dualistic reductionism...Continuing to privilege formal, neutral systems of abstraction obscures the embeddedness of all abstractions in historical, concrete social relations, thereby precluding the possibility of emancipatory critique” (1990, p. 328).

2.6 Conclusion

Although it is true that “rights gave political form and shape to their [the Madres] disobedience, linking them to an international network of associations and watchdog societies” and despite the fact that “the rights discourse of the Mothers never descended into the narrowly individualistic nor numbingly legalistic” (Elshtain, 1996, p. 141), the discourse of universal human rights does indeed entail a privileging of these components. This indicates that the meaning of human rights as it is understood by the Madres may not be entirely captured by the precepts of this discourse. Furthermore, as Elshtain mentions above, it is somewhat ironic that the Madres’ human rights claims are often couched in particularistic calls based on gender identity, particularly motherhood. In this way, the promotion of human rights in Argentina is framed and justified as a matter of protecting families (Bonner, 2005, p. 56). As such, the predominant “dualistic reductionism” of the Madres takes the form of their framing as a mother’s movement. Deconstructing this frame will finally allow us to see beyond the restrictions imposed by it and, taken together with the human rights frame, this put us in a position to finally expose the subjugated knowledges of the Madres movement.
Chapter 3 – The Identity Frame

Figure 3 – Foreground: A sculpture “Madre tierra pariendo libertades” by Alicia Battiaz & Dante Puig. Background: A shrine to Eva “Evita” Perón. On display in the headquarters of the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo.

Figure 4 – Unnamed sculpture on display in headquarters of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora.
3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I introduce the other frame commonly used in analyses of the Madres movement: *identity*, specifically *motherhood*, a subset of gender identity. I will begin by giving evidence of the ways the Madres in particular have been framed, and have framed themselves, as a “mother’s” movement. Since this topic sheds light on the nuances and complexity within the movement I will first draw parallels between the two organizations in a section treating “the Madres” as a whole, and then proceed with sections looking at each of the two organizations separately, in order to underline some key distinctions in their respective framing practices and identity politics. I will then contextualize the practical application of this frame by outlining identity as a frame in social movement theory in general, giving a brief sketch of the relevant debates surrounding identity politics and collective action, and finally showing how this fits within human rights discourse. The chapter concludes that the gender identity frame, like the human rights frame discussed in the previous chapter, poses certain limits on the Madres movement which suppress its transformative potential and curtail our understanding of its meaning and significance.

3.1 The Moral Authority of the Particular: The Madres as Women and Mothers

“Yo decía: ‘Señor, que me van a hacer? Me van a matar? A mí no me importa.’ Digo, ‘Ya de alguna manera me mataron.’”
–Mirta Baravalle, Madre de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora

What brought the Madres together was undoubtedly their common experience as mothers
of disappeared children. In many ways, the movement and collective identity has been framed by their particular identity as “woman,” and also as “mother,” evidenced clearly by their choice of name: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Much of the literature on this movement treats them as a quintessential “motherist” movement, because their demands began (and have continued to be) framed in terms of their being mothers. This identity presumably gave them moral authority, especially in a cultural context where gender roles are strictly defined by marianismo, an exaggerated femininity based on woman as the mater dolorosa who suffers in silence and is willing to sacrifice everything for her children and/or family; and, machismo, an equally exaggerated masculinity based on man as the virulent patriarchal figurehead (Arredondo, 2002; H. M. Fraser, 2008; Klein, 2011; Malin, 1994; Schirmer, 1989). As such they were seen to be acting “properly” in accordance with their ascribed role as keepers of the sanctity of the family. These roles have strong religious connotations linked to traditional Catholicism. The Catholic Church is an extremely powerful institution in Latin America and has shaped customs, practices, and traditions within Argentine society and culture. It has been posited, and confirmed by them personally, that their identity as mothers offered a degree of protection from the authorities, who first saw them as powerless and more or less inconsequential and later sought to portray them as “crazy women” and “bad mothers” that should bear the responsibility of raising “subversive”

39 The religiosity of the Madres is an important topic because of the Church’s tacit support (or outright complicity, depending on who you ask) of the military dictatorship during the time of the disappearances. Also due to the “Proceso” (the social re-organization program initiated by the Junta) explicitly invoking strong Catholic ideals, using social adherence to religion as a means to gain popular support. In this way it could be said that they were acting in the best interests of the country by re-installing good Catholic values through “limpiar la sociedad” (Las Madres, 1985). Although this is beyond the scope of the current analysis it is an important factor in the Madres framing practices since their desire to represent themselves as god-fearing, good wives and mothers lost much of its appeal after the Church refused to help them, and even more so once it was revealed to be complicit in the disappearance and torture, causing several mothers to abandon their faith (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014; Programa de derechos humanos).
children (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014; Bejarano, 2002; Bonafini, 1985; Borland, 2006; Mellibovsky, 1997; Navarro, 2001; Schirmer, 1989; Steiner 2003; Sutton, 2007).

Many authors have looked at the Madres as an exemplary women’s movement in which power is derived from the public performance of emotions, grief in particular (Bayard de Volo, 2006; Bosco, 2007; Bouvard, 2011; Brown & Pickergill, 2009; Foss & Domenici, 2001; Gandsman, 2012; Klein, 2011; Pieck, 2013; D. Taylor, 1997; Taylor & Rupp, 2002; Thornton, 2000). While some suggest that this grieving is an unhealthy defense mechanism that they have condemned themselves to re-enact *ad infinitum* (Femenía, 1987) and will ultimately hinder their movement (Malin, 1994; Foss & Domenici, 2001), the display of emotion should be looked at as Jasper suggests, neither as an irrational response, nor as a purposive strategy which can be deemed effective or not, but as an end in and of itself. Such public expressions are an important political statement that is valuable to the actors regardless of a movement’s wider intentions.

This engagement with motherhood has caused some to see the Madres as upholding traditional patriarchal gender roles (particularly Feijóo, 1989). However, many others consider that by engaging in public protest the Madres movement necessarily transgressed the private domain to which women were strictly relegated at the time, making theirs a challenge rather than pandering to women’s “proper” place in the home. Their occupation of public space, especially this particular place, the *Plaza de Mayo*, was both “brilliant and courageous” (D. Taylor, 1997, p. 194) and “undoubtedly a political act” (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1993, p. 22). They clearly wanted to harness the power of this space, which they achieved by calling themselves the Madres.

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40 The role of grief and the healing process when mourning a disappeared relative will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.
de Plaza de Mayo, effectively claiming a public shared space as belonging to them (the “de” in their name implying that they are mothers from the Plaza, implying ownership/belonging) while also setting the stage for their portrayal as mothers of Argentine society (the “de” instead signifying of the Plaza). As Fisher notes, “the presence of women in the streets and in the Plaza de Mayo signaled a different account of ‘woman’ in which political identity became tied to familial relations and in opposition to the overextension of the state into the ‘private’ sphere” (1993, p. 15). Therefore, the Madres movement was “predicated upon overcoming the public/private divide as it impresses upon women’s lives (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1993, p. 18).

And yet, while they continue to use this subversive motherhood as an impetus for their activism, they vehemently reject the label “feminist” (M. Meroño, personal communication, February 4, 2014), throwing into limbo their status as revolutionary women and making their use of this identity all the more ambiguous. Nevertheless, the first major publication by Hebe de Bonafini, an autobiography entitled Historias de Vida published in 1985 and translated (in part) for the first time into English by Steiner (2003), is replete with feminist undertones, as Hebe portrays herself as being ever-aware of gender inequality and citing anecdotes throughout her life which reflect her questioning of the status quo. At the same time, equally present throughout the text is a strong narrative stressing the importance of the role of motherhood and the ways that being a mother, especially to her disappeared son Jorge, changed her life. She writes, “My sons were making me feel different. Like a unique, irreplaceable person. I am not ashamed to say that my sons were my justification for being” (as cited in Steiner, 2003, p. 37). She explicitly links her own political consciousness to the lessons taught to her by virtue of her experiences as a mother (Steiner, 2003, p. 41), writing that her sons’ political commitment helped her evolve her
own thinking on issues like poverty and health. She writes about them, “[t]hey didn’t necessarily accept the way things were. They felt that established truths should always be subject to examination” (as cited in Steiner, 2003, p. 42). She includes near the end of Historias a long, heart-wrenching poem allegedly written by her son in detention and smuggled out to her, called “Plegria a una madre encapuchada” translated as “Fervent Plea to a Hooded Mother.” This poem is written from the perspective of an unborn child to his captive mother. In it he describes the happiness he will bring her despite her current pain and suffering, reiterating that she is not alone because they are together, and underlines the strength their shared love gives them both. It ends with the following verse:
No te sientas triste mamá, que yo te acompañó
No estés sola: yo y la esperanza somos los
Compañeros de tu soledad.
Piensa en nosotros que ésa es la verdad.

El presente es duro para vos,
pero el infierno pasará y todo volverá a ser
como antes, y aún más fáciles,
porque yo podré llorarte para que me mimes y riamos juntos.

Todos nos acunan, yo y vos recibimos el cariño que hace falta para que yo me haga gigante cuando salga de adentro tuyo.

Así, mamá, no te olvides de lo que pienso,
nunca, nunca más, así mantendras la alegría que me mantiene con infinita fortaleza dentro de tu ser mamá.

(Bonafini, 1985, p. 236)

Don’t be sad, Mama, for I am with you.
You are not alone.
I and hope are your companions in your solitude.
That is the truth. Think about us.

The present time is hard for you, but the inferno will pass and everything will be again as it once was, and even happier, because I will be able to cry for you so that you can cuddle me and we can laugh together.

Everyone here wants to rock my cradle
They fill both of us with the love I need
to be big and strong when I come out from inside you.

So, Mama, don’t ever forget these thoughts of mine.

That you will always have the happiness that sustains me, with infinite vigor, within your being, Mama.

(Trans. Steiner, 2003, p. 12)
In her autobiography, Bonafini also reproduces a letter she wrote to General Videla, one of the first leaders of the Junta, in which she appeals to him for answers based on her “dolor de madre y luego el dolor de ciudadana” (Bonafini, 1985, p. 112). In holding up this poem and letter as beacons for her activism, Hebe de Bonafini displays a careful straddling of identity frames, in that she demonstrates how both a strong feminist consciousness and a fundamental commitment to the mother-child relationship equally fed her desire to struggle and gave her strength to continue struggling against all odds. She expands this to include the actions of the movement, proclaiming the “closeness” and “equality” shared by the Madres. She points out a general lack of these qualities within already existing human rights groups, citing this as the main reason they refused to work with these groups, and decided to found their own separate organization (Steiner, 2003, p. 76).

Beyond individual expressions, the Madres’ tactics on the whole (although differentially, as I will demonstrate) also reflect their motherhood, in that they use symbols strongly associated with the mothering role. Their first public advertisement appealing for the release of their children was published on Argentine Mother’s Day, October 15th, 1977 (Steiner, 2003, p. 95). They wear white cloth diapers with their missing children’s names embroidered on them as head scarves, and these pañuelos have become an iconic symbol of the movement. They also carry giant photos of the desaparecid@s faces during their protests and marches. These are powerful methods which effectively re-humanize their missing children (H. M. Fraser, 2008, p. 37), as well as mesh the public with the private by bringing aspects of the family (portraits, diapers) squarely into the public sphere (Bejarano, 2002, p. 138). These tactics, which revolve around each mother’s particular experience of loss caused by the disappearance of her own specific
child(ren) have changed drastically over time within the two organizations. These changes in relation to their identity politics will be discussed below when highlighting the two organizations’ disparate approaches more recently. The schism within the Madres marks an important moment, because it is the point at which the AMPM beings to divert into a decidedly more radical trajectory while the LF becomes more moderate by comparison (although true to the rampant contradictions inherent to this movement, the opposite is also true). It is to the former that we will turn next, because being the larger of the two organizations, replete with offshoot organizations such as the Universidad Madres de Plaza de Mayo and its own printing press, Ediciones Madres de Plaza de Mayo, it is mainly responsible for the propagation of certain imagery and shaping popular knowledge of the Madres. Since some of the most contentious tactics employed by the AMPM have been wrongly attributed to the movement as a whole and some of the tactics they have abandoned are continued today by the LF, it is crucial to make these differences explicit in order to see how they each engage in framing practices and how these are important (or not) to their goals. Fleshing out these facets will begin to make clear the complexity of the Madres as a movement and illustrate the difficulty of framing them too narrowly.

3.2 Identity Politics of the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (AMPM)

The Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, under the leadership of Hebe de Bonafini, began to re-frame their collective, movement, and individual identities in striking ways, that some have argued ultimately help them in their quest for radical social change (Bouvard, 1994), while others have decried this re-framing as a fatal blow to their credibility and contrary to their
espoused values (Steiner, 2003). This drastic transformation on the part of the AMPM, the “socialization of motherhood” as they have come to call it (Bonafini, 2002; Mellibovsky, 1997), has been well documented in the literature. This notion is premised on several key abstract propositions, namely: that they are “permanently pregnant;” that their children gave birth to them; and, that they are all mothers to every desaparecid@ (Bonafini, 1985, 2002; Bouvard, 2011; Burchianti, 2004; D’Antonio, 2006; Di Marco, n.d.; Fisher, 1993; Iramain & Neilsen, 2002; Klein, 2011; Mellibovsky 1997; Steiner, 2003; Sternbach, Brizeno, & Bonafini, 1987). These propositions cannot be easily accommodated under a simple motherist frame nor fully rejected by anti-essentialist critiques. Perhaps this can only be fully understood from the perspective of an alternative social project based on the achievement of what I call their secondary/prospective goals, and also appear to be (but are not in fact) diametrically opposed to the primary$retrospective goals of finding their children. (I will elaborate on both the irrationality and the logic of this paradox in the next chapter.) This shift has led them to no longer carry photos of the disappeared (although interestingly they still have them on display in their headquarters), to remove the names of their children from their pañuelos (which now instead all read “Aparición con vida de los desaparecidos Madre de Plaza de Mayo”), and to refuse any act of recognition, memorialization or commemoration of any single Madre or disappeared person, claiming that to do so is to favor some at the expense of others. This position also entails the complete rejection of economic reparations paid to family members of the disappeared by the government. Mercedes was very explicit about this point underlining, “La AMPM, cuya presidenta es Hebe de Bonafini, no aceptamos dinero por vidas. Nosotras no vendamos ni la sangre, ni los ideales de nuestros hijos” (M. Meroño, personal communication, February 4,
Although this approach has been heavily criticized it remains vehemently endorsed in official AMPM discourse.

The origins of this position was first described by Marguerite Gúzman Bouvard as “revolutionizing motherhood” (1994, 2007, 2011), and has been attributed with fostering a shared sense of anguish and indignation at the injustice of the disappearances and using this to identify with and lend their support to other incidences of systemic abuse (Borland, 2006, p. 133; Fisher, 1993, p. 136). This re-framed maternal identity has been expanded over time and is now commonly linked expressly to a new vision of citizenship (Bosco, 2001, 2004; Borland, 2006), described variously as “maternidad política” (Ortiz Cuchivague, 2012), “maternidad resignificada y socializada” (Pita, 2001) and “maternal citizenship” (Bejarano, 2002). For Sutton their “politicized motherhood” is an “embodied collective project” which is achieved by “poner el cuerpo,” literally “to put the body in” (2007, p. 143). This analysis is echoed by both D. Taylor (1997) and Klein (2011, p. 103), the latter seeing it as a type of “performance [used to] invert and politicize stereotypical Latina modes of citizenship...to incite social change.” Zarco employs a theoretical framework called “femenismo maternalista” to describe theirs as a “transformación de identidad de madre biológica a madre política” the result of which is the “construcción de la ciudadanía femenina” (2011, p. 240, 243). For D’Antonio this “utilización radical del maternaje” has given the Madres greater political clout (2006, p. 38).

This iteration of motherhood effectively combines both sides of the binary first presented by Molyneux (1985), elaborated by Alvarez (1990) and taken up more recently by Beckwith (2007), by being both practical and strategic, feminine and feminist. In addition, it combines notions of individual and collective identity since, “[m]otherhood as a collective strategy of the
movement cannot be separated out from motherhood as individual experience for these women... [these] are interconnected and interdependent” (Burchianti, 2004, p. 143). In this way, they are “challeng[ing] the social organization of society” (Lind, 1992, p. 148). This stance exemplifies the feminist assertion that “the personal is political” though in a unique manner, through the politicization of “personal” issues and identity, as well as its inverse: the personalization of political issues and identity (Ortiz Cuchivague, 2012, pp. 173-74). There is clearly great potential for this new tack to serve as the basis for an expansion of the Madres movement from an exclusive group made up strictly of mothers of desaparecid@s to a more inclusive one made up of socially aware citizens seeking to construct a more just and equitable civil society.

However, so far this utopian project has been less than successful due to the contradictions and polemics of the movement that actively resist a unification of the sort that would be required for the kind of shift envisioned by these feminist scholars to materialize. In short, the AMPM vision has remained just that—a vision. Expanding on several of these controversial aspects that are hugely significant and politically costly to the AMPM involves looking at their position now in comparison this to their earlier position, and assessing the change in terms of their stated vision or goals. This is where one can begin to see a marked disjoint, making note of the repeated about-faces that present themselves.

The Madres were strongly anti-government since their first protest against the military Junta in the 1970s. However, the transition to democracy put them in a predicament: Since the Junta was no longer, who would they blame now? To whom would they direct their protest? For their part, the Madres of the present-day AMPM decided early on that the democratic government was no better than the Junta and pushed hard against it too, condemning efforts at
reconciliation, which contributed to the vast gulf between them and the mothers who went on to found the LF. The LF, on the other hand, believed that democracy gave them the opportunity to work within the system to achieve their goals, whereas the AMPM was exceedingly against such an alliance (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014; N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014). As one of the members of the AMPM stated,

They [LF] said the government was doing something, that we had to give them time. It was a political difference because we [AMPM] wanted to go on being firm and critical. The others said no, we’re in a different era, we’re in a democracy. We can’t put pressure on the government, now we have civil rights and there’s no more violence, things have to be different. But we thought it was all a lie, that this wasn’t democracy. (María del Rosario as cited in Fisher, 1993, p. 123 emphasis added).

In sum, although democratization in Argentina did lead to a fracturing of the movement, the Madres did not cease to exist or become subsumed into the now-open formal political structure, as some theorists taking a political opportunity approach may have expected (Feijoó, 1989, p. 73). Instead, the Madres innovated in surprising ways, re-framing their movement and their identity to advocate for broader change (secondary/prospective goals) and linking this to the restitution of all those who were disappeared, in this way maintaining their primary/retrospective goals.

However, this position vis-à-vis working with the state entails important contradictions that deserve to be noted. Firstly, in terms of their status as an autonomous civil society organization. They have recently begun to work very closely (some say much too closely) with the Kirchner administrations, beginning with Néstor Kirchner in 2003 and continuing today with the second term of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner who took over as president when her husband died suddenly. Some have begun to question their ability to offer objective criticism due to this
new degree of direct involvement with partisan politics, arguing this necessarily impinges on their autonomy (more on this below) (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014; M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014; N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014). Regardless of these claims, this is an interesting about-face since the AMPM were previously staunchly anti-government, but such a position is no longer tenable due to this newly formed alliance.

Secondly, their previous intransigent skepticism of government does not fit well with their tactic of invoking Argentine generals and past political leaders as glorious heroes. The AMPM vigorously promote an alignment with the likes of Juan and Eva Perón, José San Martín the Argentine “liberator,” and prominent revolutionary figures that personify Latin American socialism such as Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, and Subcomandante Marcos of the EZLN. They do this as a means of fomenting patriotic sentiment and in order to valorize and cast in a positive light the revolutionary character of their children, the disappeared. As Mercedes put it to me,

La palabra ‘revolución’ es muy linda porque es sacar todo lo malo y hablar de la revolución como algo muy orgulloso. Bueno, tenemos que cambiar todas las cosas malas que pasan en este país rico que tenemos. Entonces es todo eso que tratamos de hacer, humilde. [Para] la patria grande como hacía San Martín, como hacía Bolívar, como hacían todos porque querían la patria grande (M. Meroño, personal communication, February 4, 2014).41

Although not their intention, this could be seen as a highly hypocritical comparison to make coming from a progressive movement that espouses non-violent resistance and has been

41 “The word ‘revolution’ is very beautiful because it is removing the bad and talking of revolution as something to be very proud of. We need to change all the bad things that happen in this rich country of ours. So it is this that we are trying to do, modestly. For the homeland like San Martín did, like Bolívar, like all those others did because they loved the homeland.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
compared to Gandhian peace politics (Bouvard, 1994). Denouncing systemic inequality and injustice on the part of a military government loses much of its strength when it is done alongside the celebration and glorification of these “great” political figures that are by no means peaceful egalitarians and could be seen actually as representing abuse of power, the oppression of war, and the concomitant loss of liberty and life. I have to agree with Steiner (2003, p. 160), who persuasively argues that this shift toward “active militancy” is a confounding tack for the AMPM to have taken, considering the supposed values they hold dear which include freedom, justice, and equality (M. Meroño, personal communication, February 4, 2014).

Overall, the way that the AMPM have employed the mother frame has changed drastically over time, and has come to stand in direct contrast to the earliest efforts of the movement, as well as potentially in tension with their newfound militancy. The LF, on the other hand, have made changes to their movement and collective identities as well, but these will be seen to be more consistent with their initial demands and ultimately more morally defensible in terms of their prospective goals as well.

3.3 Identity Politics of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora (LF)

“What I want more than anything, what I want to convey is the lives of the children. Who they were. You know? What they were like. What is it that one wants to rescue? Not what I did, or what happened. No. No! I don’t want to be put in front of my daughter! My daughter is in front of me!”

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42 “What I want more than anything, what I want to convey is the lives of the children. Who they were. You know? What they were like. What is it that one wants to rescue? Not what I did, or what happened. No. No! I don’t want to be put in front of my daughter! My daughter is in front of me!” (translation K. Laird Barry).
In 1986, somewhere between a dozen and twenty Madres no longer wished to be associated with or take part in the re-framing practices that Hebe de Bonafini had initiated, choosing to create a new organization whose name (Madres Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora) reflects their feelings of being the authentic carriers of the Madres’ original vision which for them was grossly perverted by the changes instituted under Hebe’s leadership (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014). Interestingly, the LF takes a very similar stance (practically speaking) to the AMPM, but with some important differences. While they too describe their own motherhood as becoming “socialized” through their activism (Borland, 2006, p. 133; N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014), for them taking on the role of mother of all the disappeared does not require the rejection of their particular children. As Mirta attested, “Mi compromiso único era trabajar en buscando mis hijos, después buscando a los hijos de otras madres como ellas buscando a mis hijos. Porque ya después, no era el ‘nuestro,’” después eran todos. Yo veo una photo, y todas las fotos son como si fueran mis hijos” (personal...)

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43 “I say when they ask ‘How will you go on?’ I say, while one of us has health we will continue each one of us as we are able. The alternative cannot be among us because we are mothers and we cannot just close the cycle, close the office and say ‘We made it this far, and that’s enough.’ No.” (translation K. Laird Barry).

44 There is no clear consensus on this figure. Bouvard (1994, p. 16) cites “about a dozen,” but I was told that it was closer to twenty, and that this number constituted approximately half of the original core group (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014).
communication, February 14, 2014). This position is further evidenced by their continued use of photos of their own disappeared children on placards at their marches, their openness to acts of memorialization and commemoration (of desaparecidos as well as Madres fallecidas), continuing to print “busquedas” in newspapers, and keeping their children’s names and dates of disappearance on their pañuelos. All of these mementos are spurned by the AMPM members as being too particular and thereby limited in their potential to be revolutionary. While the AMPM Madres see themselves as having progressed to a new stage of activism which involves greater commitment to society more broadly (M. Meroño, personal communication, February 4, 2014), for the Madres of the LF this is tantamount to erasing the memory of their children and therefore contrary to the fundamental reason for their activism. They told me of being deeply pained by the proposition that they cast aside their children in this way and their anguish over the harsh reprisals from fellow mothers when they questioned this shift in approach before the split (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014; N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014; N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014). In this light, the extreme form of socialized motherhood of the AMPM begins to look like a re-de-humanization of the disappeared, working against their initial desire to re-humanize them in the eyes of society and the world countering the de-humanizing discourse of the Junta. For the LF, being mothers of their children does not impede them from working on behalf of a wider constituency of all children, or even society in general. In fact, it is their experience and recognition of motherhood as a positive relationship between mother and child well into adulthood that is a continual source

45 “My only commitment was working looking for my children, and after that looking for the children of other mothers as they were looking for mine. Because after it wasn’t ‘our’, after it was ‘all’. I see a photo and every photo it’s as if it were my children.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
of strength motivating them to act to re-affirm that bond. It is worth quoting at length a letter

Mirta Baravalle shared with me, written by her daughter Ana in 1972 and tucked away to give
her at a later date. Ana was disappeared along with her husband four years later without ever
having sent the letter. It reads,

> Sí, porque tú no serás nunca mi posesión y serás por siempre, mi madre. Quizás nunca te
> haya dicho lo que eso significa para mí, quizás nunca te lo haya demostrado. Ocurre que
> uno, en su inmadurez, es tan tremendamente egoísta y ciega que no sabe apreciar en su
> máximo valor el lazo que lo identifica con un ser que es el compañero incondicional. Y
> no generalizado, hablo de tí y no de la madre como una abstracción: tú lo ha sido y lo
> seguirás siendo, porque has vivido en cada momento, lo has demostrado en cada actitud.
> Para mí, no eres la madre aislada de la vida, de la madre lejana. Eres la mujer con todas
> sus buenas y sus malas cosas. Eres la humanidad. De eso hablo cuando me refiero a que
> no deseó poseerte: jamás podría hacerlo. Pero, sí, tú estarás siempre aunque yo esté lejos.
> Tu vida está en mi vida. ‘De las rosas nacieron nuevas rosas y de éstas seguirán
> naciendo rosas’... Es el devenir eterno, la integración en el todo, lo absoluto, de lo
> intransitorio. Mientras tanto, vivo por la alegría, por la alegría luchó y por la alegría
> moriré. Eso es lo que quiero de mi sino. Nunca sufras por mí. Piensa que nada ni nadie
> logrará derrumbarme (personal communication, emphasis added).

Since discovering this letter in 1978, Mirta keeps printed laminated copies of it to give out, thus
demonstrating the high value she places on these words. This real, emotionally wrought
connection expressed in highly particular terms (“no generalizo, hablo de tí y no de la madre
como una abstracción”) is what impels the Madres of the LF to continue pushing for social

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46 “Yes, because you will never be my posession and will always be my mother. Maybe I never told you
what this means to me, maybe I never showed you. It happens that one, in their inmaturity, is so totally
egotistical and blind that they do not know how to really appreciate the value of the bond that can be
identified with a person that is an unconditional partner. And I am not generalizing, I am speaking of you
and not of a mother as an abstraction: you have been and will continue to be it, because you have lived
each moment, you have displayed it in every attitude. For me, you are not the mother isolated in life, the
faraway mother. You are a woman with all the good and bad that comes with it. You are humanity. That is
what I speak of when I refer to not wanting to possess you: I could never do it. But yes, you will always be
there even if I am far away. Your life is my life. ‘From roses are born new roses and will continue to bring
still more roses’...This is the eternal transformation, the integration of everything, the absolute, the
unchangeable. Above all, I live for happiness, for happiness I fight and for happiness I will die. That is
what I want my destiny to be. That you will never suffer for me. Know that nothing and no one will
succeed in breaking me.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
change premised on a cherished relationship, as envisaged by their disappeared children. Rather than seeing this as a liability, they see it as a critical part of their activist identity. They too stress that they have taken up the mantle of their children and fully espouse their revolutionary visions in a similar sense to the AMPM assertion of being “birthed” by their children (i.e. their inner revolutionary capacity was brought to the fore when their children were taken from them). They too feel as though they have taken responsibility for each and every one of the disappeared and as such have become a mother to each one on equal footing to their own biological child(ren) (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014). But, they do so in a way that does not sacrifice what in their eyes is the entire point of being a Madre de Plaza de Mayo: their personal experiences of mothering their own particular child, and then having that child be disappeared.

This organization also shifted its position on working with the government over time. As mentioned, they broke off from the AMPM largely due to the latter’s total refusal to work with the government during the transition to democracy. The LF, on the other hand, preferred to give the “benefit of the doubt” to the new government, and saw some of their actions as very positive, even courageous (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014). For this reason, they can be seen as more pragmatic, as they were (and are still) open to working with any organization that is willing to help them in their cause and that shares their basic principles.47

The allegation that the Madres of the LF all worked open-heartedly with the government and all

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47 It is important to note that although as an organization they adopt this more flexible approach there is not unanimous agreement within the LF on this. Rather, each member is free to support or not support an action, and decisions are made in a truly democratic fashion by means of long discussions and voting on key issues. They do not require unanimity but general consensus on issues, preferring to let each member act according to her beliefs (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014). Debate is welcomed and indeed promoted as a healthy part of their organization (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014).
accepted economic reparations is simply false (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014; N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014; N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014). This is slander spread to tarnish their reputation and make it seem as though they had compromised on their dedication to the disappeared by, in the words of their accusers “accepting money for the blood of their children” (M. Meroño, personal communication, February 4, 2014). In fact, the reparations were not uniformly accepted within the LF, rather each member was left to make the decision for herself. On the subject of reparations Mirta underlined that it is indeed a complex and very personal issue,

Nunca veo una reparación...Sea poco, sea mucho, no hay cantidad en el mundo que te pueda valorar para un hijo. Nosotras, Línea Fundadora, cada uno decide por su mismo. Esa no es una decisión que se tiene que tomar en conjunto, porque cada uno es independiente. Y esa entra dentro de los sentimientos, lo que siente una persona. No es un ‘algo’ que este clasificado dentro de lo que debe hacer un organismo con cierta limitaciones o ciertos compromisos. Ese es muy personal. Porque no es la madre sola. Está el hijo, está el hermano, hay otra familiares. Yo puedo decir ‘no’ y la otra madre dice ‘¿por qué no?’ (personal communication, February 14, 2014).

Leveling these accusations, it is easy to see how the issue of reparations and working with the government played such a central role in the “quiebre fundamental” between the Madres (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014). The allegations seem all the more suspect when one considers the current position of the LF, which is much more critical of the Kirchner administration(s) than the AMPM. Despite being open to pragmatic alliances, the LF certainly does not partake in the unabashed veneration—verging on worship—that Hebe and the AMPM

48 “I never saw it as a ‘reparation’...Small or big, there is no quantity in the world that can equal the value of a child. We, the Founding Line, each one of us decides for herself. That is not a decision that can be made as a group, because each one is independant. This enters into emotions, what a person feels. It is not a ‘thing’ that can be classified under what an organization with certain limits or certain commitments should do. That is very personal. Because it is not a matter of the mother alone. There is the child, there is the sibling, there are other family members. I can say ‘no’ and another mother says ‘why not?’” (translation K. Laird Barry).
exhibit toward the Kirchner administrations, instead expressing distaste and suspicion at “el fervor con que Hebe defiende todo lo que dice Cristina” (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014). On the contrary, the LF have voiced criticism about the hypocrisy of the current president (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014), her government’s manipulation of the media, and its selective allocation of resources to human rights organizations (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014). They also question the government’s dedication to the memory of the disappeared, and implicate the AMPM in several corruption scandals and other deplorable actions on the part of the Kirchner administrations. For example, several interviewees challenged recent events at the Ex-ESMA, in particular a macabre *asado* held at the same site of the alleged burning of victims corpses during the dictatorship, which was called “aberrante totalmente” (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014), and about which one went as far as to declare:

> Hacer asado ahí saber todo eso [lo que pasó en este lugar], me parece una burla a la memoria de los desaparecidos y a la memoria de los familiares...Asado ahí me provoca una indignación espantosa. Y que sea defendido por Hebe de Bonafini y defendido por la Presidenta y por un montón de otra gente más, es una herida (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014).

This proximity has led the LF to openly question the AMPM’s ability to be an independent, critical voice on issues of concern to “the Madres,” claiming their autonomy is jeopardized given this close relationship. The amount of money alone that the AMPM have supposedly received (“una animalada de plata” as Mimi put it), first from Néstor and then from Cristina Kirchner for

49 “To have a barbecue there knowing all of that [what happened in that location], seems to be to be laughing at the memory of the disappeared and at the memory of the families...A barbecue in that place provokes in me a sense of unbelievable indignation. And that it is defended by Hebe de Bonafini and defended by the President and by a whole bunch of other people, it’s a wound.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
various projects (many allegedly have never been completed, with the money having gone
instead into the private pockets of members of the organization and their immediate families)
would lead anybody to question this unequal distribution. Moreover, there are apparently those
working within the AMPM who also hold positions in the government, and vice versa. This has
led one interviewee to seriously doubt the legitimacy of the membership and the independence of
this organization. As she sees it this is a major problem that is largely unrecognized:

Uno desde afuera puede decir ‘Eh ¡Cuánta gente que tiene Hebe! ¡Qué bárbaro!’ Sí, sí,
tiene mucha gente. Pero mucha de la gente que tiene Hebe es gente que tiene un sueldo
en el gobierno. No es gente cómo yo o cómo tú que están ahí. Tienen convicciones
seguramente, eso no lo dudo pero también tienen compromiso porque reciben sueldo...
(N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014).50

Most damning, she went on to mention by name several individuals this applies to, implicating
the presidents of both the AMPM and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, insisting that, “Todas las
personas que están cerca del gobierno, que tienen una relación muy fluida con el gobierno, tienen
los hijos ocupados en cargos. Y varios, no es que tengan un cargo, tienen varios cargos...Cuando
vos te pagan un sueldo de alguna manera te están cooptando.”51 As Nora explained,

Cada organismo [de derechos humanos] fue entrando en el oficialismo y reacomodándose
para lo que el gobierno quería...para satisfacer los deseos de la Presidenta...Es eso que
nos cuesta ahora en este momento. Ya está desvirtuando esa independencia...Ahora ella
[Hebe de Bonafini] está oficialista, pero más que oficialista. Está tapando porque ella

50 “Someone from the outside could say ‘Wow, look how many people Hebe has got! How extraordinary!’
Yes, yes, she has a lot of people. But many of the people that she has are people that hold jobs within
the government. It is not people like me and you that are there. They have convictions, that I am not denying,
but they also have an obligation because they receive a salary...” (translation K. Laird Barry).

51 “All the people that are near to the government, that have a close relationship with the government,
have children in salaried positions. And multiple positions. It’s not that they have just one, they have
various positions...When you are paid a salary in one way or another they are coopting you.” (translation
K. Laird Barry).
tuvo actos que no se signen a la ética (personal communication, February 16, 2014).

The LF also differs in its thinking about the role of feminism in the movement. They are more sympathetic to so-called “feminist” issues, and certainly display what could be labeled a definitively feminist approach in terms of their personal values and how they conduct themselves in their daily lives, in interactions with others and amongst themselves. However, like the AMPM, they resist describing theirs as a feminist movement or organization. This appears to be due to an anachronistic take on the meaning of feminism, influenced by the rhetoric of 2nd wave feminists that they may have come into contact with during the 1970s and 80s, and falsely assuming that this is “what it means to be a feminist.” As such, they are wary of aligning themselves with such a position. It is easy to see how a feminist approach could be too radical for a movement mainly made up of conservative, devout Catholic housewives, (especially in a cultural context such as theirs) and goes a great distance in explaining why “feminism” is unlikely to be embraced openly by these women. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that for all

52 “Every [human rights] organization has entered into officialdom and has reorganized to accommodate what the government wants...to satisfy the desires of the President...That is what is difficult for us at the present time. Now it is distorting that independence...Now she [Hebe de Bonafini] is officialist, but even more than that. She is covering up because she is committing actions that are not ethically sound.” (translation K. Laird Barry).

53 See Stephens (2011) for an in-depth analysis of the deep-seated tensions between the various “waves” of the women’s movement.

54 Even this assumption on the part of most scholars of the movement is slightly misleading, as I found that quite a few of the Madres in fact had been “politicized” from an early age, either through experiences of poverty and inequality growing up or having parents or grandparents that were politically active. Many also knew of and supported their children’s “militarization” that was the main reason for their subsequent disappearance. Although many Madres expressed a naiveté about the dangers of the Junta in Argentina, they were by no means oblivious to political and ideological oppression, and were frequently actually acutely aware of it and supportive of acts of resistance, but their focus was often on other contexts (for example, in Italy and Spain under fascist regimes in the early 20th century) (Programa de derechos humanos). This awareness gets ignored since it does not fit well with the narrative of “victims” and their portrayal as innocent, middle class housewives with no history of involvement in politics or even in public life more generally.
intents and purposes, they are a feminist organization that is part of the “women’s movement” because of their strictly female membership, their expressed values, principles, perspectives, preferred tactics and overall worldview, which are all consistent in many ways with feminism (Howe, 2006).

Women’s movements mobilize through gendered structures (Ferree and Martin 1995) and frames of meaning that draw on gender divisions and hierarchy (Taylor and Whittier 1992), and to varying degrees construct solidarity around gender and its intersections with race, class, nation, sexuality, and other identities. Finally, women activists frequently avoid conventional politics and even disavow being “political” and turn, instead, to everyday forms of activism deriving from their community roles and identities as women (Naples 1998)” (as cited in Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 47).

In other words the Madres’ identities as women, mothers, wives, and activists are undoubtedly feminist even if they are formed along more traditional “gendered structures and frames of meaning.” This is common among women who through their activism “may develop a feminist consciousness and identity,” even when this activism is not primarily directed at combating sexism (Taylor as cited in Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 45). Such a feat will be accomplished once we successfully extend “the boundaries of what should be thought of as ‘the women’s movement’ and simultaneously...treat feminism as a variable political identity” (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 45).

3.4 Literature Review: Identity Framed Social Movements

The literature from social movement theory using political process and resource mobilization models often takes for granted the shared identity of protesters within a movement and as such tends to overlook it as an analytical category. Even when identity is addressed, the slipperiness of this term makes it especially vulnerable to reification and susceptible to
overextension (Jasper, 1997, p. 70, 85). Studies of social movements that employ a positivist rational approach can work at counter purposes by implicitly upholding dualistic thinking about the essential roles and inherent capabilities of various identifying categories, thereby inadvertently harbouring a bias that to a certain degree pre-determines the possible outcomes and explanations. With its focus on the strategies and resources employed to achieve instrumental goals traditional theories are often unable to explain how or why identity is important to activists and movements (Bernstein, 2009, p. 266). To counter this problem Bernstein proposes breaking identity down into “three analytic dimensions” in order to better understand its role in collective action: “identity for empowerment,” “identity as goal,” and, “identity as strategy” (2009, p. 267). However, her “general model of identity deployment” (2009, p. 268) remains dogged by a certain totalizing determinism by taking a formulaic approach that comes across most obviously in her eagerness to classify social movements into neatly separate categories.

Identity as a mobilizing frame for collective action, or the identity politics of social movements, has been studied most recently and most fruitfully, under the guise of “new social movements”55 or what Jasper (1997) prefers to call “post-industrial” or “post-citizenship” movements. Theorists of these “new” movements take a cultural approach, focusing on factors such as identity and emotion that had been largely ignored in earlier models, and looking at how these intersect or interact with the more “traditional” categories of strategies, resources, and

55 “New Social Movement” theory rose to prominence in the 1990s but has more recently been contested because of the false dichotomy it implies between “old” and “new” movements, which is especially troublesome for Latin American cases (J.A. Hellman, personal communication, October 25, 2013).
goals, in order to better explain social movements on the whole (Bernstein, 2009, p. 265).56

According to this view, identity is both external and internal, given (by biological, biographical, and historical contexts) and constructed (individually and collectively), and applied as “frames” to a movement or protestor (Jasper, 1997). A particular identity can be both an impetus for joining a movement, based on a pre-existing shared trait that makes people feel as though they “belong” together (typical of citizenship movements, for example, the black civil rights movement in the Southern United States), and/or an outcome of working within that particular group (more reflective of the “new” movements described here). In this sense, feelings of solidarity amongst members of a group can generate a collective identity (and/or a “movement identity,” which Jasper [1997] contends are slightly different phenomena) which is a key factor in sustained mobilization (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009, p. 105). For this reason identity must be understood as working on two levels simultaneously: the individual and the collective with neither one taking precedence over the other. These are interconnected and inseparable spheres.

3.4.1 Feminist Debates on Identity Politics and Social Movements

Women’s Movements

The essentializing tendencies of identity politics has even—perhaps especially—been troublesome for women’s movements, beginning with the earliest writing which followed in the footsteps of Bentham and Mill and taking a liberal democratic view of the need for equality.

56 When she writes that, “[t]his cursory overview of the movements cannot (and is not meant to) capture their complexity, but only to suggest the importance of understanding identity deployment and why certain movements appear to be internally or externally directed, and why they seem to seek ‘instrumental’ or ‘identity’ goals” (2009, pp. 276-77), she is not only admitting to some important limitations of her own analysis, but also hinting at the significant limitations inherent in the structural approaches she relies on. Her use of an “either/or” portrayal of social movement identity belies a dualistic tendency.
between the sexes (Jones & Barron, 2007, p. 32). Since then gender has become one of the most contentious identifiers because of the many different (social, cultural, biological) interpretations of the categories “women,” “men,” “gender,” and even, as we shall see, “mother.” In other words, there has been a vast expansion in the scope of identity politics since the rise of modern liberalism. Postmodern and critical philosophical thinkers have provided important insights in this area. Judith Butler (1990, p. 37) laid out a theory of gender as “performance,” arguing that it is through people acting out “roles” that identity as male or female is both constructed and continually re-confirmed in society according to the “obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (as cited in Jones & Barron, 2007, p. 56). Her theory is relevant to the study of identity-based social movements and is especially useful to the deconstruction of traditional instrumental approaches, since “[s]he rejects appeals to a reified or naturalized gender. She also challenges the idea that ‘unity’ is a prerequisite for political action” (Sawicki, 1994, p. 305). Jana Sawicki gives an excellent if brief review of the key contributions of post-structural thought to the critical analysis of gender in an article entitled “Foucault, Feminism and Questions of Identity” (1994). In particular, she notes how “[Foucault’s] analyses of disciplinary power exercised outside the confines of the narrowly defined political realm of the modern liberal state overlap with feminist insights about the politics of personal life” (1994, p. 290). Further,

...his critique of Enlightenment humanism and its appeals to an autonomous subject of knowledge and history mirrors to some extent the radical challenges that feminism has posed to the fundamental epistemological and political assumptions of modern Western thought. Foucault’s skepticism regarding universalism and essentialism in modern emancipatory theories coincides with feminist skepticism about the use of liberalism and Marxism for feminist emancipatory politics (1994, p. 290).

“Women” is perhaps one of the most reified—and for this reason also hotly disputed—identities,
making it especially challenging to use as an analytical category in social science research (Jones & Barron, 2007). This is not to say that it has been avoided, on the contrary, many scholars have sought novel ways of understanding women as a force for political mobilization and social change. Maxine Molyneux in a study of women in revolutionary Nicaragua first proposed the idea of distinguishing between women’s interests and gender interests, and designating the former as being either “practical” or “strategic” (1985, pp. 232-33). This theory seemed to propose that women’s interests could be categorized as either practical: viewed as reactionary, focused on household survival, and associated with the fulfillment of ascribed gender roles; or strategic: entailing a proactive, conscious effort to challenge and transform the patriarchal system. Implicit in this theory is the supposition of the eventual progression from the former to the latter as one gains ‘consciousness.’ Shortly after, another preeminent feminist scholar, Sonia Alvarez (1990), applied different terms to say much the same thing. In her study of women’s organization during the Brazilian transition to democracy, she uses Molyneux as a point of departure, however; she substitutes “feminine” for “practical,” and “feminist” for “strategic” (Alvarez, 1990, pp. 23-5). Many authors since have been quick to criticize these early works, condemning them as essentialist, reductionist, patriarchal, developmentalist, and hierarchical (Cosgrove, 2010, p. 10; Disney, 2008, p. 33; Ray & Korteweg, 1999, p. 49; Radcliffe & Westwood, 1993, p. 19; Stephen, 1995, 2005). In a later work, however, Molyneux defends her theory, arguing that critics often took it out of context and that rather than reducing women to “dichotomous essences” her ideas were meant to serve as a “heuristic device” to reveal the complexity of women’s lived reality and as such were never meant as a one-size-fits-all explanation (2000, pp. 152-55).
Many other changes and controversies have surrounded the modern women’s movement that are too numerous to detail here, but Staggenborg and Taylor (2005) provide an excellent review of these changes in the North American context, highlighting significant gaps in the research on social movement theory in this area. They paint a picture of social movements “as complex networks of organizational and nonorganizational actors, ideologically structured actions, efforts to create new cultural logics in organizational fields, collective identities, and challenges to different systems of authority and the distribution of rewards, as well as to the political status quo,” which can “direct our attention to the role of culture in the continuity, decline, and reemergence of social movements” (2005, p. 48). They provide evidence of the increasing prominence of more complex cultural and emotional networks and communities that operate on discursive, institutional and interpersonal levels which play an important role in sustaining movements especially in times of abeyance, but continue to be undermined by the binaristic logic underpinning approaches that focus solely on public protest events (2005, p. 43). They stress the need for expanding scholarship in this area to see the extensive but much less visible “tactical repertoires” of women’s contemporary activism which has important ramifications for the understanding of social movements more generally (2005, p. 46). “Bringing the analysis of the women’s movement into the center of social movement theory calls for a conceptualization of power and protest that is long-term and less state-centered than that of the contentious politics approach” (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 48). They conclude that, “theoretical perspectives on social movements that overlook gender differences and dynamics in collective action have helped bring about the ‘live burial’ of feminism” (2005, p. 47). This makes clear that “gender difference” remains an important aspect in the contested terrain that is feminist
and women’s mobilization—a terrain that is still very much alive despite declarations to the contrary, and deserving of much more attention. These issues are especially significant to sort out with a social movement like the Madres which emerged and evolved parallel to the women’s movement, leading to the need to re-evaluate their use of identity frames, rather than taking these for granted as something already given, known, or assumed to be following an expected trajectory.

**Mother’s Movements**

The introduction of motherhood into the discussion of the politics of gender identity adds another layer of complexity, and has been seen as the “flip side” to Butler’s work on gender. Since mothering is a traditional role seen as oppressive to women by relegating them to biological functioning and keeping them subservient to men, it has been categorically rejected as an emancipatory identity by many (especially “2nd wave”) feminists. However, it has also been a powerful motivating force serving as a basis of women’s collective resistance in movements dubbed “motherist” (Howe, 2006) or “mother-activist” (Shriver, Adams & Einwohner, 2013). Thinking about mothering as something more than merely an active component in women’s domination was developed by Sara Ruddick (1989/1995), Carol Gilligan (1982), Nel Noddings (1984), and Adrienne Rich (1976). These women revolutionized thought in this area by tackling head on the issues complex identities assigned to notions of “woman” and “mother,” proposing new ways of looking at the feminine/feminist debate. Theirs constitutes a serious and praise-worthy attempt to work through, rather than to tiptoe around, the “essential” characteristics of women in terms of their biological, sociological and psychological differences

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57 Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) is the seminal work in this area.
from men. This pioneering work systematically bridged scholarship and lived experience, making tangible for the first time some heretofore abstract philosophical concepts and creating a area of thought now known as “care ethics.” More recently, Julie Stephens (2011), Nel Noddings (2010), and Lynn Stephen (1995, 2005) have updated the ideas of maternal thinking and caring for the 21st Century. Work that explores the meaning of “motherhood” within social movements makes a great contribution both to care ethics and social movement theory. By combining elements from feminist theory with more formal traditional aspects of movement dimensions such studies go a long way in demonstrating how women’s lives and actions actually exhibit this thinking, thereby connecting theory with practice in a profoundly straightforward way. In Stephen’s study of the CO-MADRES of El Salvador and the EZLN in Mexico she suggests the use of Gayatri Spivak’s term “strategic essentialism” understood as a mechanism closely related to the framing discussed in the previous chapter, whereby an essential characteristic is strategically chosen to represent a group in order “to project ‘sameness’ to outsiders” (Stephen, 2005, p. 74). Drawing on the work of Spivak (1989), Hall (1996) and Butler (1990), she deconstructs mother/ing/hood, arguing that it should be seen as a strategically employed, essentialized identity used for a variety of reasons but mostly due to the clarity and organizational coherence achieved through this frame. Despite some early arguments to the contrary (Feijóo, 1989) when women protest as mothers in a conscious manner it should not simply or only be seen as upholding patriarchal oppression of women but rather indicates a purposive move to engage with that identity. Diana Taylor (1997, p. 194) explains this difference relating it specifically to the Madres de Plaza de Mayo,

The mother’s movement did not begin when the individual mothers became acquainted in
their search for their children; it originated when the women consciously decided to protest and agitate as mothers. That as marks the conceptual distance between the essentialist notion of motherhood attributed to the Madres and the self-conscious manipulation of the maternal role – understood as performative – that makes the movement the powerful and intensely dramatic spectacle that it is (as cited in Stephen, 2005, p. 69).

This debate indicates that there is a preponderance of overly prescriptive “solutions” to complex social phenomena, which continually lead to the making of simplistic and binaristic deductions from even the best efforts at critical analysis (Butler as cited in Sawicki 1994, p. 300). This legacy has been difficult to dispense of, however, postmodern and feminist thinkers have countered this tradition by offering compelling non-reductionist analyses that carefully separate the constituent components of identities, revealing their “fictional” character as being “neither fixed nor stable” (Sawicki, 1994, p. 299). In doing so, they have managed to show how complex “gender” is as a unit of analysis, being multi-faceted and dependent on many variables for its construction and maintenance. Individual psychology and biology, socio-cultural milieu, and historical and geographical context all help to shape identity frames (Jasper, 1997, p. 364). These overlap, surge, and recede in a continuous process over the course of our lives, and should be thought of as such, rather than taken as the static immutable foundation of a person, group or movement.

3.5 Identity Politics and Human Rights Discourse

Because identity (particularly collective identity) is used to delimit a particular group it represents a significant departure from universal human rights discourse. Such “particularist” frames are necessarily at odds with the principle of universality enshrined in the liberal human
rights model because rather than being based on a trait or characteristic that is common to all of humanity, collective identity gives precedence to one feature common only to members of that specific group (often defined by racial, ethnic, gender, or a cultural belief/value, such as “peace,” “nuclear disarmament,” or “animal rights”). There is much debate surrounding both the potential to scale up (in terms of the purchase of particularist traits/beliefs/values to larger communities—a local/global disjuncture), and scale down (arguments over the applicability of universal norms to particular groups, mainly taking a “cultural relativist” position) such a hegemonic discourse. Although there are a handful of international conventions within the liberal human rights model tailored to particular groups (protecting women and children, for example) these are an exception rather than the norm, and have been extremely difficult topics on which to reach consensus. Furthermore, group or collective rights are seen as inhabiting the complete opposite end of the spectrum from universal human rights.

It is often taken for granted that an organization consisting strictly of women would be agitating “for” women’s rights (in some form or another), but this is not always the case. Nor is it the case that women’s movements agitating “for” human rights are subjugating their identities as women. As the cultural approach to social movements demonstrates, it is rarely a case of “either/or,” but rather which identity is the most salient or logical “frame” for a movement to engage at a particular time, and does not necessitate the total erasure of other identities. Sometimes this is strategic: in order to achieve a stated goal more efficiently or make a demand more effective within a defined space or to reach a certain group of people. But identity frames must also be thought of not simply as a means to an end, as just another a strategy or resource according to structural theories. Rather, Jasper (1997) argues that expressing an identity in solidarity with
others could be an end in and of itself regardless of the likelihood of it helping to achieve a particular goal, as protesters get pleasure out of taking a moral or political stance with others they see as “like” themselves in some way. Therefore, questions of context and biography become of the utmost importance if one seeks to understand and evaluate why and how a person (or movement) chooses to mobilize based on a particular conception of identity. In other words, matters of identity politics and their expression in social movements are intimately bound up with wider cultural and individual idiosyncrasies that are contingent on time and place, rather than being simply a reflection of a hidden political agenda, and may or may not be consistent with legally conceived rights-based claims of a movement.

3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the debate above gives an indication that the simple application of the identity “mother” or “woman” to the Madres is indeed too restrictive a frame because it entails implicit meanings that do not reflect the nuances of this complex case. In the next chapter we will delve deeper into the revelations made possible now that these frames are more clear-cut, further highlighting their limitations as explanatory frames for the Madres movement.
Orientation for the Final Two Chapters

In the last two chapters I identified the two discursive frames by which the Madres as a social movement are interpreted, and through which they often self-interpret. My aims in each of those first chapters were to: a) make evident the main features of each of those frames; b) point out the ways those features do and do not fit the Madres, and hence; c) establish the fact of the shortcoming of those frames for fully explaining the genuinely complex, long-term activist phenomenon that is the Madres so that we could imagine another interpretive approach could be taken. In the next chapters, I will supply another layer of interpretation, another way to understand the complex, long-standing movement. It draws on political philosophy and a consideration of different linguistic interpretations of “knowing.” This is the novel contribution my thesis makes.

The first step will be to examine more closely the complex goals of the Madres, and the evolution of their demands over the past nearly forty years, including clarifying the differences between the two Madres organizations in terms of their avowed goals. Although it is fairly obvious that the goals of the Madres as a movement have something to do with their children, a closer examination shows that this is not a simple story. The separation of their goals into retrospective and prospective helps make sense of their demands in terms of the two dominant discursive frames. I will then elaborate on the kinds of questions that can be formed by these two conceptual frameworks.

I propose that these goals are in fact more closely linked than these framing practices allow. I will suggest a way of understanding this linkage through their slogan, “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia.” I argue that what these mean, and what they amount to in practice, can be very
different depending on how we understand those terms. The first thing I do therefore is to explain how these goals are interpreted and responded to by the two frameworks, i.e. what does a human rights agenda ask for in terms of justice? What does truth mean in terms of a mother-centric worldview? I will then work to show the alternative conception of these terms implied by their usage in the Madres movement.

Having determined these alternative understandings of their demands and how these can be linked in a way that was not possible using the dominant frames puts us in a position to identify other critical deficiencies resulting from the application of these frames. Firstly, I will offer an analysis of why the questions made salient by the two frames are not exactly the Madres’ questions. Evidence for this is diverse. One example is that the Madres did not stop their claims and demands even when the forms of justice available to them as a human rights recompense were technically met. How do we make sense of this? One route is to consider the Madres irrational. This was the view projected by the military and later adopted by the Alfonsín administration. It is also evidenced by the first book published about the Madres, entitled “Las Locas de la Plaza de Mayo.” Another example lies in their continued demand for their children back “alive.” What sense can we make of the fact that the Madres, many of whom are in advanced age, continue today to demand the return of their children “con vida” despite the sheer impossibility of this?

From the work I did in Argentina and a close reading of their goals over close to four decades, another way forward is to show that their most fundamental goals (expressed in their demands for memory, truth and justice) are not well represented or captured by the above interpretations. They may well be irrational, but irrational in a very productive and important
way. These are puzzles, but the puzzles are clues to seeing something more complex at work. I explore alternative conceptions of what their questions might be, suggesting that there is another, better way to handle these seeming inconsistencies, these puzzles. The explanation I offer makes use of the concept of “unthinkability” and focuses on a linguistic differentiation between different ways of knowing in Spanish.

A secondary and related goal of this thesis is to use this new approach, and the explanation of the specific phenomenon of the Madres I arrive at based on this approach, to understand something about what it is that makes a social movement last so long and be so successful. This success and longevity is not strictly attributable to the moral and legal force of responding to human rights violations or the moral force of identity-based claims. These are certainly in play but there is something more, or beyond these, that is also significant. It is the ability to push boundaries through their questioning practices.
Chapter 4 – The Madres and the Unthinkable: What is Not Yet Known

Figure 5 – A recent “busqueda” (“wanted ad”) printed in the newspaper by Mirta Baravalle, in search of her daughter and son-in-law.

“In Argentina, of 3,445 cases submitted to the Government, 99 were clarified by the authorities, who provided information on the fate or whereabouts of the missing. Another 43 cases were resolved by those who originally reported a disappearance. More than 3,300 cases remain unresolved.”


“Yo creo que en la lucha nuestra, si perdes la ética, perdes todo.”

–Nora Cortiñas, Madre de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora

4.0 Introduction

This chapter sets out to make more clear the tensions that have resulted from the application of the dominant frames to the case of the Madres movement. By focusing only on a particular set of questions made salient by these frames the space necessary for the elaboration of alternative perspectives and the linking of their fundamental demands (as I interpret them
according to retrospective and prospective goals) has not been made. This analysis draws on Frankfurt’s notion of *unthinkability* and makes a distinction between the verbs “to know” in Spanish, in an effort to reveal the “subjugated knowledges” latent within the Madres’ alternative line of questioning. Thinking this through will have an impact on broader questions related to individual and collective mobilization, which I will make clear by exposing common threads which, once pulled through, can be stitched together to form a more coherent picture of the strength and ubiquity—however misunderstood—of such questioning practices. By explaining the ways in which I see these frames as giving rise to certain restrictions in our thinking about the Madres movement, which are most visible when analyzing their goals and slogans, I hope to show how these framing practices have limited the ultimate comprehension of the transformative potential of this and other similar social mobilizations. Also, in keeping with the rejection of traditional, reductive dualistic thinking, it should be acknowledged that these proposed alternatives represent additions in order to fill the gaps left by the two dominant frames (human rights and identity), and are not meant as simple substitutions, as the reality is often much more dynamic and variable than a discussion of discrete frames implies. I am in agreement with Jelin that,

> Each new development or adoption of a certain measure to deal with the past opens up new opportunities and possibilities for further measures, which are always path dependent...[E]ven when decisions regarding the adoption of mechanisms to deal with the past are seen as political choices among alternatives in an either-or pattern, historical reality shows trajectories and paths that involve interaction and succession rather than mutually exclusive alternatives (2007a, p. 142).

Given what we know about the first frame (human rights) and the second frame (gender identity), and the cultural context and particular contingencies so crucial to social protest and
mobilization, I will work toward showing how the instrumentalization of the Madres’ goals implicit in these frames runs counter to their basic and most fundamental *raison d’être*, acting as a hindrance to the movement itself and to the understanding of it and hence the ability to learn from it.

4.1 Making Sense of Goals

4.1.1 Retrospective Goals

To begin, their concerns seemed to be first and foremost about the disappeared, falling under what I term their ‘retrospective’ or ‘primary’ goals. Looked at using either of the dominant discursive frames, these goals are generally thought to be concerned with addressing questions of “*What?*” “*When?*” and “*Where?*” related to the past. In other words, these demands hinge on the establishment of the “facts” surrounding the disappearance of their children. These include the demands for information as to where their children were being held, and appeals that they be formally charged or returned home safely. These are captured by their slogans “¿Dónde están?” and “Aparición con vida de los detenidos-desaparecidos.” According to the human rights frame, what impelled the Madres to action was solely the illegal detention and disappearance of their children, conceived importantly as innocent human beings. This is understood to be a reflection of their fervent desire for restitution of the basic human rights of their disappeared children and for the reversal of the injustice done to them on account of this blatant violation of their rights, as discussed in chapter two. These goals are thought to be achievable through locating the disappeared physically, or finding information on their whereabouts, discovering the charges against them, etc. Conceived as such, these goals can be considered more or less ‘resolvable’ through the proper application of a combination of the rule of law and scientific investigative
techniques. Trials, truth commissions, exhumations and reparations, and wider societal recognition and formal apologies are the common legal and scientific methods put forth as capable of offering a form of ‘resolution’ or ‘justice.’

Using the second frame, their retrospective goals are normatively anchored in more culturally specific, socially engrained moral codes concerning the role of a woman as carer and person responsible for the sanctity of the family and of society, as mentioned in chapter three. This perspective holds that it is the responsibility of a mother to know what her child is “up to” at all times and to help him/her in times of need. According to this thinking it is a mother’s duty to work incessantly and sacrifice her own wellbeing for the sake of her child. Important here is the framing of the disappeared as innocent children. It is in this way that they have channeled the moral authority of the “good mother” to mobilize support for their cause. By focusing on the emotional attachment between a mother and her child they are able to legitimize their calls for a full investigation by basing it on the need to reunite and rekindle such a significant bond that was broken by the separation of the two when one disappeared.

4.1.2 Prospective Goals

What I term the ‘prospective’ or ‘secondary’ goals of the Madres are those that are forward-looking as opposed to specifically addressing the past. This sense of temporal separation is the result of the eventual acceptance that their retrospective goals were both in part untenable (they would not get their children back alive) and to a certain degree accomplished (they had obtained some factual understanding of the disappearances). As such, these goals foreground the questions “How?” and “Why?” in order to establish the circumstances that led to the
disappearances. These goals are exhibited in their desire to speak on behalf of their disappeared children, to take up their revolutionary project and work towards broad social change. These goals can be seen according to a human rights frame as geared toward creating a community and society that is respectful of every person’s rights. These also espouse a nonviolent mode of behaviour, hoping to create the conditions that can act as a safeguard against the mentalities and systemic problems that precipitated the atrocities of the dictatorship era. These prospective goals, then, are aimed at denouncing inequality and injustice, and focused on the desire to end discrimination and destitution that continue to plague Argentina and the rest of the world.

These prospective goals are worked towards by the Madres through the “socialized motherhood” discussed in chapter three. It is this identity that has allowed them to openly embrace their children’s revolutionary character and adopt a commitment to the social change envisioned by them, characterized mainly by a rejection of injustice and inequality of all kinds and at all levels of society. This is generally accepted in the literature *a priori* as an adaptation typical of long-standing social movements and related to the assumed progression within women’s movements from practical to strategic, feminine to feminist interests. As Jaggar contends,

> Grassroots organizations, initially formed to address such immediate practical needs as those for food, shelter, water, income, medical care, and transportation, often come to recognize that immediate needs are generated by larger systems of inequality, not only between genders but also among classes and nations. Members of these organizations may then turn away from an exclusive focus on the local and the immediate and move to creating longer term strategies directed against structural inequalities...” (2005, p. 94).

It is also occasionally explained as a purposive action used to maintain relevance and foster relations of solidarity between themselves and new generations of social change agents (Borland,
2006; Whittier, 1995). Often though, it is simply explained by the Madres themselves as a way of paying homage to the ‘sacrifice’ their children made by knowingly put their lives at risk when they became involved with the struggle for social justice in a political environment hostile to such activities. In all of these explanations, the broadening, painted as a transition from retrospective to prospective goals, remains a function either of their identity as human rights activists or once again as women/mothers committed to their children (although this time to their legacy as opposed to their physical well-being).

4.1.3 Goal Framing

The two frames analyzed in earlier chapters presuppose that there is an underlying logic or rationality at work that can be pointed to in order to explain their initial protest as well as any changes within the movement over time, and even supposes that a rational explanation for the events which led the Madres to mobilize in the first place also exists. Such rational approaches make sense of incomprehensible scenarios, they give order to the chaos, so to speak. In this way, human rights and gender identity frames are justified due to their ability to offer the Madres, and society, a way of processing, or coming to terms with something truly horrible and thereby providing some semblance of closure. This being said, the flat-out rejection of such rational explanations on the part of the Madres suggests an irrationality (which has been levied against them as a means of de-legitimizing by those threatened by their protests, ranging from the military and journalists to democratically-elected Presidents), which at first glance appears counter-productive. The cost of this position has been at times very high for the Madres. As a result they have been labeled crazy, intransigent and inflexible, their movement dubbed doomed
or misguided, and even accused of being unpatriotic and somehow damaging to national identity or unity.

The view of this stance as counter-productive, however, can only be determined in relation to a definition of their goals. If the goals are defined in a purely instrumental way, in order to establish facts and get answers to what/where/when questions—as checklist of sorts—then this would indeed appear a highly questionable position to advocate. If, however, we take an approach similar to that of Gandsman (2009) in his article “‘Do You Know Who You Are?’ Radical Existential Doubt and Scientific Certainty in the Search for the Kidnapped Children of the Disappeared in Argentina,” we can see how the Madres, like the Abuelas Gandsman analyzes, are keenly interested in less tangible questions, with an eye to generating doubt and maintaining pressure through continual critique.

4.1.4 Puzzles

Although the demand for answers to questions of a purely instrumental nature are entirely logical if one considers the issue through the frames just mentioned, I argue that this framing equally detracts from deeper questions being asked by the Madres, leaving several puzzles yet to be deciphered. These frames necessitate a false separation between retrospective and prospective, and imply a strategic/instrumental character that is somewhat artificial and detracts from the fuller significance of their demands. When seen instead as a continuum of sustained struggle for social change by means of consciousness-raising, it is possible to view the Madres as having a wider transformative potential along the lines of what Sawicki (1994, p. 307) identifies is “not unlike Foucault’s genealogy. Both are designed to challenge current self-understandings and to
create the space for new forms of subjectivity.” This flies in the face of traditional interpretations of social movement “success” and longevity by proposing that their continuation, rather than being the result of a strong group unity or a generational effect, is instead the result of a purposive, if abstract, desire to keep their demands alive through sustained critique and questioning.

4.2 Re-conceptualizing the Goals of the Madres

“We must expand the horizons against which the questions of how and what to read and write are both posed and answered”
(Said, 1994, p. 317)

“We never had a narrow political agenda. Ours was a moral protest about political abuse, about how and why people disappeared.”
(María Adela Antookeletz of LF, as cited in Elshtain, 1996, p.142)

“Yo le digo: ‘Señor, con tanta injusticia que están haciendo, ¿eso es la injusticia que ustedes dispensen? ¡Van a nuestras casas y llevan a nuestros hijos! Y nosotros vamos a aceptarlo? ¡Nunca!...Se llevaron personas. Se llevaron a nuestros hijos...Ustedes deben habernos dicho por qué se llevaron a nuestra hija.’”
–Mirta Baravalle, Madre de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora

As I see it, their retrospective goals also entail asking the questions “How?” and “Why?” that pose a greater challenge to the status quo by threatening to reveal the rampant and on-going systemic violence that is as much a causal factor in the disappearances as the more specific issues that tend to be pointed to, such as the political vacuum created by the sudden death of Juan

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58 “I said to him, ‘Sir, with all this injustice that they are doing, this is the injustice you are going to excuse? They went into our homes and took our children! And we are just supposed to accept it? Never!...They took people. They took our children...You should have to tell us why they took our daughter.’” (translation K. Laird Barry).
Perón and the isolated dictatorial bent of a handful of military strongmen. Such deeper questions are virtually unaccounted for in the instrumental rationalization of the universal human rights approach, as well as absent from the emotionally charged particularist plea of a mother for her child. It appears as though, to use a common saying, the former cannot see the trees for the forest, and the latter, suffering the opposite affliction, is intensely focused on a single tree at the expense of a view of the wider forest. One Madre attested to this possible limitation saying,

 Cuando dicen ‘las madres salieron porque perdieron a sus hijos.’ Hay todo un mito, ¿no? Nosotras nos acompañó mucha gente en esta lucha que no tuvieron hijos. Tenemos amigas que no tuvieron hijos y que vienen acompañándonos años y años, con el mismo sentimiento...Entonces la maternidad en sí no es la que te hace que defiendas a ese hijo, a esa hija (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014).

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The human rights discourse focuses exclusively on the victim qua rights-bearing human being, while the motherhood frame places the mother figure front and centre.

In their eagerness for simplicity, neither of these is fully capable of explaining the Madres movement in all its complexity. Rather, the Madres seem to be taking Said’s advice, as quoted above, and pushing the limits of the questioning practices in significant ways. When he speaks of these questions as falling under “reading and writing” he is referring not only to what we commonly understand as literature but rather proposing something much more amplified and altogether more subtle: “[m]edia, political economy, mass institutions—in fine, the tracings of secular power and the influence of the state—are part of what we call literature” (Said, 1994, p. 318). In other words, questioning on a discursive level is crucial, paralleling Foucault’s call for an analysis that is attuned to the infinitesimal elements; the large and small workings of the

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59 “When they say, ‘The madres took to the streets because they lost their children’ There is this whole myth, right? Many people accompanied us in our fight that did not have children. We have friends that don’t have children and that have accompanied us for years and years, with the same sentiments...So maternity in and of itself is not what makes one defend this or that child.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
power/knowledge dyad. I argue that such an expansion of horizons is being—and quite possibly always has been, albeit nearly imperceptibly—undertaken by the Madres, and that the questions they are asking may very well be more important to the achievement of their goals than the ones made central as a result of the imposition of human rights and identity frames, because they allow for a crucial link to be made between their primary and secondary goals, giving an unprecedented continuity and relevance to their social project. This is exemplified most clearly in their divergent approaches after the fracturing of the movement into the LF and AMPM. The resultant broadening has paved the way for their activism to appear both highly synonymous but also extremely disparate. They are lumped together and appear to be similar because of a continuity that is assumed between the initial and present-day Madres’ activism. In some senses this is entirely justified. Despite forming these separate groups, they march in the same Plaza on the same day, they use some of the same slogans and symbols, and appear to have similar motivations, as they claim to be working toward a very similar set of goals. However, closer examination of the actions and behaviour of the AMPM betrays a straying from their stated ethical position. They demonstrate several contradictions that make their adherence and dedication to their stated goals questionable. Nevertheless, the analysis of goals applies equally to both organizations that (at least outwardly) take very similar stands in this regard.

4.3 What is Left Unthought: The “Unthinkable”

Harry G. Frankfurt’s The Importance of What We Care About (1988) provides an interesting way to think about this critical position inhabited by the Madres. In the final chapter, “Rationality and the unthinkable” Frankfurt lays out a critique of common philosophical thought
surrounding moral dilemmas that has important ramifications for the vision of rationality espoused by traditional social movement theorists and human rights discourse. He works to show its inability to offer an explanation of people’s choices particularly in circumstances of great personal import which he attributes to a profound “neglect [of] the incipient conflict or tension between freedom and identity” (1988, p. 178 n1) that is highly relevant to the current project. In other words, the utilitarian focus on one aspect (“the only rational good is well-being”) necessarily suppresses other aspects essential to a person’s nature that too need to be considered when weighing possible paths of action and making judgments about these.

He shows how the “bare person” (citing John Rawls) of utilitarian and Kantian thought is “oddly and disturbingly impersonal” (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 179), and offers a correction of rational decision-making using the notion of “the unthinkable,” that is better able to take account of the complex reality of our social selves. The heart of the issue for him lies in the “tension” described above, which takes for granted that both total freedom of choices and expression of individuality are possible without addressing what he sees as the mutual exclusivity of these two things. He describes these more as layers or perhaps overlapping concentric circles, arguing that there are cases in which a person is constrained, either in their personal desire or behaviour, in a way that is somehow prior to their expressed will and as such represent a limit on behaviour to that person based on the possibility of so-called “unthinkable” modes of action. He explains,

What does it mean to say that an action is for a certain person unthinkable? ...Sometimes people are unable to do things because the circumstances are not right or because they lack the necessary power or skill...Sometimes, however, a person may be incapable of performing a certain action even though...he is in a perfectly good position to perform it...He cannot perform the action because he cannot will to perform it (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 181 emphasis in original).
He does stress that there are multiple reasons for this unthinkability, which do not always entail a moral component:

To be sure, an inability to bring oneself to act may sometimes derive from considerations that are distinctively moral...On the other hand, the considerations on account of which something is unthinkable may be entirely self-regarding and without any moral significance at all. Someone may be unable to perform an action because he would be severely maimed by it, or because it is intolerably injurious to his pride, or because it is too disgusting (1988, p. 182).

However, this caveat does not imply simply an “overwhelming aversion...or some other type of irresistible impulse,” rather this aversion is so deeply endorsed by the person that they cannot come to terms with committing a particular action (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 182).

Frankfurt comments on the significance of this concept by granting it the power to shape a person when he writes how, “the unthinkability of the action is so decisive that it constitutes for him a limit not only on what he can do but also on what he can be. It is a genuine necessity of his volitional nature...In this sense it is a constitutive element of his nature or essence as the person he is” (1988, pp. 187-88). This position is therefore as much a fundamental reflection of a person’s identity, an integral part of themselves, as any other identity they may ascribe to (for instance as being mother or even a human being). However, it is in tension with these because they can require actions which seem to be at odds with this other innate part of themselves.

Frankfurt locates this powerful identifying feature within each person, endowing rationality with a particularity often thought to be a liability. As he explains,

The will of the rational agent need not be, then, empty or devoid of substantial character. It is not necessarily altogether formal and contentless, having no inherent proclivities of its own. If a person’s will were a completely featureless instrument, with no capacity other than to transmute his judgment about what to do into an effective expression of his active powers, then he would closely resemble the ‘bare person’ to which Rawls says utilitarianism reduces the agent of rational choice. In fact, however, it is precisely in the
particular content or specific character of his will – which may salubriously lead him to act against his judgment – that the rationality of a person may in part reside (1988, p. 190).

4.3.1 Unthinkable ≠ Irrational

Frankfurt posits that although this condition of unthinkability may be not be completely conscious it cannot be dismissed as irrational. As he writes, “A person who asserts that he finds an action unthinkable means that there are no circumstances in which he would be willing to perform it...It may be clear to him that there are matters with respect to which he is incapable of acting rationally” (1988, p. 184). His explanation of the relationship between rationality and the unthinkable is worth quoting at length because of the way it corresponds with the cultural approach to social movements. By highlighting the role of emotion and individual idiosyncrasies in decision-making rather than simply relying on reason, his argument parallels Jasper’s on the motivations for involvement in social protest.

It is widely assumed that a person is acting under the guidance of reason, and that he is in control of himself, only when what he does accords with his judgment concerning what to do. If his judgment is overwhelmed or superceded by feelings, he is presumed to have lost his rational self-control...Suppose we say that being guided by reason is a matter of acting in accordance with one’s judgment...It seems to me, however, that this way of looking at things is wrong. *It is a fundamental error to regard every surge of emotion against judgment as an uprising of the irrational.* To be sure, there is a rather trivial sense in which feelings are inherently irrational: They do not pertain to the faculty of reason, because they are not essentially discursive. In a more substantial sense, feelings may accord better with reason than judgment does. A person’s judgment may itself be radically contrary to reason. Therefore, the fact that his judgment guides his conduct hardly means in itself that he is acting rationally...There is – not only among philosophers but also in law, and even in common sense – an unfortunate tendency to suppose that when someone’s will is so powerfully constrained by his emotions that he cannot help acting in a certain way, his condition is in this respect pathological. In fact, however, it may be just the opposite” (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 189).

In cases such as these it is clear that an individual’s judgment of appropriate action is as much a
function of external events and circumstances as it is a matter of their own internal will and desires. This thinking counters the traditional view of social movement actors as either irrational, acting on emotions alone, or overly calculating agents acting on instrumental, rational lines of logic. Frankfurt goes on to argue further,

“[W]hen someone finds that an action is for him unthinkable, what he discovers is not that he is unable to maintain control over himself. That would entail the passage of control to forces that are not truly his own. They [the feelings that incite him to revolt against an action] are in the most authentic sense his own forces, which are not only within him in a simple, literal way but are also integral to his nature. Although they prevent him from performing an action that he had thought he wanted to perform they do so only by virtue of the fact that he does not really want to perform it. His inability to go through with the action reveals it as one that he is unwilling to will (1988, p. 184).

This can clearly be related to cases where mobilization occurs despite a strong likelihood of repression. This concept shares several additional characteristics with the cultural approach to social movements. First of all in terms of its being highly relative, about which Frankfurt comments, “[w]hat is unthinkable for some people may be for others not only perfectly reasonable but exquisitely correct” (1988, p. 187). This idea therefore offers an important counter-point to the principle of universality of human rights discourse—that there is a set of shared moral principles that can be used to promote ‘good’ actions and condemn ‘bad’ ones. Also notable is the dynamism of this notion which is consistent with the cultural sensitivities of postmodern theorists looking at social change and mobilization, but is also missing from the human rights discourse. Frankfurt makes this clear when he sates, “[a]lso what is unthinkable for a person may vary from one time to another. The necessities of the will are not necessarily or always permanent. They are subject to change, according to changes in the contingent circumstances from which they derive” (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 187). This contradicts the idea that
there is a concrete set of ‘basic human rights’ that are unchanged regardless of the context or circumstances. Thus, it is obvious that applying the term “unthinkable” must be done carefully and with a full awareness of the changing nature of the people involved, their particular circumstances, and the broader socio-cultural and political context in which actions are undertaken, or refused.

4.4 Untenable Slogans, Impossible Positions

The Madres movement can be analyzed using the notion of the unthinkable by looking at certain expressions and positions they endorse. Such an analysis will help to explain why the Madres cling to their claim that the disappeared are “present” despite all logical evidence to the contrary and how this should be seen as a case where “feelings revolt against judgment” but produces, rather than a verdict of insanity, a “vindication of sanity” (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 189).

Borland (2006) does this by creating a table of the slogans used during the AMPM’s annual resistance marches from 1981-2004, where she categorizes these according to their message as falling under a protest of “Guerra Sucia,” “Derechos humanos,” “Neoliberalism,” and “Otros” which entails “general declarations on solidarity and resistance” (pp. 136-137, Tabla 1). Interestingly, as time progresses it becomes more and more common for her to identify slogans as “other” and/or falling under multiple categories simultaneously, for instance their 1993 slogan “Cabeza clara, corazón solidario, puño combativo” (Borland, 2006, p. 136). She attributes this tendency to a general broadening which involved an explicit shift from the issues of the Dirty

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60 She justifies the time frame because 2004 was the final year the AMPM carried out their march due to being “demasiado viejas para continuar” (Borland, 2006, p. 135 n5), but this does not explain why she should would neglect to look at the LF, who continue to hold an annual resistance march.
War toward an anti-neoliberal stance reflective of the “Left Turn” in Latin America that targeted the harsh economic realities of the 1990s and early 2000s (2006, p. 137, p. 138). However, this table could just as clearly indicate what I argue for here, that the Madres have often been unfairly constrained by these types of frames which by virtue of their implicit ‘either/or’ criteria. This has acted to limit the realization that they are linking primary and secondary goals via the promotion of a social and political awareness meant to question power dynamics and confront the systemic violence ubiquitous in Argentina. For this article Borland also conducted a content analysis of one of the main newspapers in Buenos Aires, La Nación, in order to get an idea of their presence in the mainstream media, using the same categories above (plus two additionally, “Cultura” and “Relaciones Internacionales” (2006, p. 138, Tabla 2). She notes a “surprisingly high” number of articles related to culture, coming in second only to those related to the disappearances and the dictatorship (2006, p. 138, p. 139). Although it is her desire to focus on the anti-neoliberal aspect that leads her to propose that, “la tendencia general es que las referencias a la Guerra Sucia fueron siendo gradualmente opacadas por referencias al neoliberalismo,” (2006, p. 140) her conclusions serve to bolster my own thesis by her acknowledgment that,

Ambos tipos de análisis muestran que las Madres no han abandonado sus objetivos, enfoques y actividades anteriores; sus reclamos por la memoria y el recuerdo constante sobre la historia de su activismo siempre están presentes, pero los han ampliado para

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61 These analyses would be even more revealing if they were to be brought up to date and specifically distinguish between the AMPM and the LF, but unfortunately the length of the present project did not allow for this. I should note that Borland does an excellent job of pulling out the parallels between the two organizations, which is valuable. I would be interested to hear her take on the AMPM slogans of late, which seem nearly all to include references to the greatness of “Cristina,” whereas the LF have maintained the slogans that Borland dismisses as too directly related to the past. Moreover, because La Nación is a strongly “oficialista” newspaper it would be extremely interesting to see their coverage of the Madres (especially the AMPM) recently, and compare this to coverage in the other main newspaper, Clarín, which is strongly opposed to the current administration. Naturally, both of these need to be taken with a grain of salt, considering free press is still a Utopian dream in Argentina (for the record, Borland mentions the issue of her use of only this one media source in a footnote (2006, p. 138, n9).
renovar los enfoques y vincularse a las muchas preocupaciones que comparten con otros en Argentina y en el exterior ... Su análisis político no solamente está vinculado a la maternidad y a la dictadura, sino que se vale de la autoridad moral que las Madres tienen como personas que se enfrentaron a la represión, y de la madurez que han adquirido como actores políticamente inteligentes, con años de experiencia para criticar la injusticia contemporánea...[que] nos ayuda a comprender la continuidad del pasado y el presente, así como la compleja realidad de la Argentina moderna (2006, pp. 140-141).62

4.4.1 An Irrational Position or an Ethical Stand?

“Las Madres tenemos una consigna: ‘aparición con vida.’ Fue nuestra primera consigna, y sigue siendo nuestra consigna. No vamos a aceptar la muerte hasta que se sepa bien que pasó con cada uno de ellos.”63

–Mercedes Meroño, Madre de Plaza de Mayo, Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo

The Madres reliance on tactics based upon the ‘socialization of motherhood,’ and their demands for ‘aparición con vida’ and ‘presentes’ take on new meaning in light of the concept of

62 “Both kinds of analysis show that the Madres did not abandon their earlier objectives, foci and activities; their demands for memory and the constant remembrance of the history of their activism are always present, but they have amplified these to renew the foci and link themselves with the many preoccupations that they share with others in Argentina and abroad...Their political analysis is not only linked to maternity and the dictatorship, but also to the moral authority that the Madres have as people who confronted repression, and the maturity that they have acquired as intelligent political actors, with years of experience to criticize contemporary injustice...[that] helps us to understand the continuity between the past and the present, as well as the complex reality of modern Argentina.” (translation K. Laird Barry).

63 “We the Madres have a slogan: ‘bring them back alive’. It was our first slogan, and continues to be our slogan. We will not accept death until it is known what happened to each one of them [the disappeared].” (translation K. Laird Barry).
of unthinkability. Their contravention of traditional rationality should not be taken as evidence of their being irrational or stupid, as one Madre said herself, they use this slogan “no porque somos tontas y pensamos que están con vida. Es porque tenemos derechos de saber que pasaban con cada uno de ellos” (M. Meroño, personal communication, February 4, 2014). They recognize the irrationality of this position, but maintain it regardless. As Frankfurt attests, “[t]here is a mode of rationality that pertains to the will itself. Like the mode of rationality that is articulated in the necessary truths of logic, it has to do with the inviolability of certain limits. Logical necessities define what it is possible for us to conceive. The necessities of the will concern what we are unable to bring ourselves to do” (1988, 190). The Madres represent a challenge to “logical necessities” via their conceptions of truth, memory and justice, and “necessities of the will” via their inability to act in ways that would recognize the deaths of their children. It is in this sense that the dichotomy of rational/irrational simply does not hold weight in the case of such a complex movement that acknowledges the impossibility of their goals without relinquishing them ipso facto. They continue to fight to find their children knowing they will likely never be found, but this in no way makes them crazy or irrational.

64 Frankfurt’s ideas also relate to their demand for “Castigo a todos los culpables,” but the ensuing debate around victim/innocent, however riveting, is beyond the scope of the current analysis. Suffice it to note the following: “Unthinkability is a mode of necessity with which the will sometimes binds itself and limits choice. This limitation may be an affirmation and revelation of fundamental sanity. There are certain things that no thoroughly rational individual would ever consider doing. But if a person did somehow consider doing them, and even go as far as to make up his mind to do them, a basically sane person could not actually bring himself to do them. Sanity consists partly in being subject to such incapacities” (1988, pp. 189-90). For the Madres too a person always has a choice, and regardless if they have considered and even made up their mind to go along with the disappearances, in their opinion they should have stopped themselves before actually following through. Consistent with Frankfurt’s argument about responsibility, the Madres maintain that each perpetrator is morally responsible, and find indefensible claims to coercion, or obeying orders. For an interesting debate on this see Frankfurt’s arguments in chapter 1 “alternative possibilities and moral responsibility,” and also chapter 3 “coercion and moral responsibility” in the same volume.
Aside from the most visible protest marches and representations in the media, the Madres have been navigating the contested terrain of human rights in the post-dictatorship era in other ways that suggest a level of “unthinkability.” Their engagement with the outlets that have presented themselves along the way can also illicit crucial insights that are not available from either the human rights or gender-identity perspectives because of their seeming “irrationality.” When the Madres were given the opportunity to make their testimonies for the truth commission (CONADEP) and at the first Junta trials, when they were told to file writs of habeus corpus, when they were faced with the option of supporting the exhumations of bodies from unmarked fosas comunes, and when they have been asked to partake in various memorializing activities, they often (and sometimes ferociously) refuse(d). For different reasons, the AMPM and the LF are unwilling to be involved in these actions not only because to do so would amount to a capitulation on their original demands and would mean acquiescing to the agent that many see as responsible for taking their children from them (the State), but also because doing so is so totally against their beliefs that they cannot even consider it as an option, it is unthinkable for them.

For their part, the LF seems to be more guided by a “moral inability,” as Frankfurt calls it. By remaining committed to particular slogans they invoke the unthinkability of conceding to their loved one’s absence. On the other hand, the AMPM, because they can be seen in a way to be violating their own principles/values of nonviolence and equality, love, respect by perpetuating the extreme polemics within the movement that casts a dark shadow over Argentine politics more generally and due to having in a way sacrificed their ability to act as a critical voice because of their close relationship with the state, they fall closer to what Frankfurt refers to as
unthinkable due to consequences of “self-regard.”

What is interesting to note is the fact that both organizations within the movement maintain a position of “unthinkability” regarding the death of the disappeared, providing further evidence that the unthinkable is essential to this movement because (despite some significant changes over time) they have held steadfast on this point, making it clear how much such a position is reflective of their fundamental values. Nora justifies their position in this way: “Yo personalmente, yo no voy a dar por muerto a mi hijo hasta que me demuestran que está muerto. Yo, a ningún político le voy a dar el gusto de que yo diga ‘Sí, mi hijo está muerto.’ No. Queremos que los busquen” (personal communication, February 16, 2014).

Regardless of the

During my fieldwork I was told of a particularly troubling rumour that recently the body of the son of Hebe de Bonafini was recovered during a state-sanctioned exhumation. It is said that she refused to acknowledge this discovery and went to some lengths to hide/reject it, as this would have amounted to a capitulation on her forceful demand, based on socialized motherhood, that the fates of each and every one of the disappeared be known. Whether or not it is true, it is easy to see how such a staunch position can degenerate into something much more pernicious, reminiscent of the “disturbingly impersonal” quality of utilitarianism that Frankfurt decries.

“Me, personally, I will not give my child up for dead until they show me that s/he is dead. I, myself will not give any politician the pleasure of my saying ‘Yes, my child is dead.’ No. We ask that they look for them.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
dynamism underlined by Frankfurt, some things clearly do remain “unthinkable.”

4.5 Preliminary Analysis

By bringing particularity into the realm of moral values generally thought of in universal terms, and by making room for an alternative conception of rational behaviour that transgresses the binaristic logic of traditional definitions, Frankfurt is able to give us the tools needed to bridge a theoretical divide, accounting for the tension between freedom and identity that is so

67 Meister makes an interesting point regarding the thinking around genocide brought about by human rights discourse that is relevant to a discussion about “intelligibility” and the purpose it serves to underline the hard limits of logic, through what he calls the “moral logic of genocide” (2011, p. 39). He explains that,

both the fact of genocide and the fear of it lie at the foundation of the particular form of Human Rights Discourse that has moved from the periphery to the center of ethical thought since 1945—and [moreover] the relation between the fact and the fear is less straightforward than Human Rights Discourse would lead us to believe...The imaginability of genocide as a defense against the fear of genocide is a disturbing point to acknowledge (2011, p. 40).

What he is saying is that genocide became intelligible morally by recognizing it as having happened to others (past victims), thus acknowledging that it could happen again, hence the simultaneous “fear and fact” because we know we have done it and could potentially do it again. Further, he argues,

what binds the late 20th century ‘world community’ is belief in Auschwitz as the crime that had become unthinkable, not because it could not happen but because it had. The ethical imperative ‘Never again’ implies that naming ‘genocide’ adds a distinctive element of horror to any atrocity so named—the revulsion appropriate to a taboo, repeatedly violated, that has been violated once again. Naming genocide thus became the first step in human rights intervention that is defined by the ultimate moral duty to put humanity ahead of all politics. This form of argument presupposes a radical shift of moral orientation after 1945 in which ‘the Holocaust’ rather than ‘the Revolution’...becomes the event that defines the relation between ethics and politics...The primacy of the global over the local, which was once the basis of a directly political imperialism, is here ostensibly humanized and offset by the primacy of the ethical over the political (2011, p. 48).

In terms of the Madres movement this notion places at odds the imperative of “nunca más” and the intelligibility of the disappearances. This suggests that it is only in accordance with the logic provided by the human rights frame that nunca más is something that is strived for, and by extension, the disappearances become “intelligible” because, like Meister says, it is the fact that underpins the fear. However, if one takes the view put forth here, that the Madres see the disappearances as wholly unimaginable, unintelligible, in a sense that they cannot fathom that such a thing actually took place, this precludes the logic of fact leading to fear. In this way, the idea of “unintelligibility” could be seen as a denial of, and alternative to, the idea of “nunca más.”
crucial to social movements and that can therefore yield novel insight into the actions of the Madres. The notion of unthinkability opens up the possibility of considering the Madres’ position from a new angle. With this new idea it is possible to see how the Madres movement may very well be aimed towards the accomplishment of different goals and the resolution of different questions than the ones made salient through the typical frames. What if, instead of simply rejecting in an irrational manner the logic provided by the human rights and gender frames, they were consistently demanding the need for something else entirely? If we consider that what might appear most logical is for them unthinkable, it is possible that their vehement rejection of the methods proposed is actually meant less as an intransigent position of aggressive defiance and more as a transgressive proposal with transformative potential for something more satisfying to their inner will and personhood. Their clarity of mind and tenacity hints at a determination that cannot be just an emotional overreaction for the sake of taking up the offensive. If they cannot conceive of the existence of certain options nor take certain actions that would make inevitable certain conclusions for the sake of their unthinkability then we need to ask, what options are available to them, and how will these work toward resolving their demands? What do they want to know that they have not already been told? These can be clarified by looking at the difference between ways of knowing, the nuances of which go a long way in addressing these (and other) questions.

4.6 Evidence: A Prevailing Uncertainty

All of my interview participants seemed deeply conflicted, still very much troubled, regarding the disappearances and the subsequent unfolding of events as the Madres’ protest
became a movement, and ideas about what the movement stands for became more and more entrenched. A pervasive theme during these encounters was that of impossibility, an unconscionable inability or incapacitation to act or think in a certain way. The feeling that “Yo no puedo” was expressed numerous times in the context of having lived through situations that were for them somehow incomprehensible, that defied any logical explanation whatsoever. For example, Mirta when referring to the actions of Hebe de Bonafini and the split of the Madres said matter of factly: “Mira, chiquita, hay cosas incomprehensibles.” She also repeated several times, “¿Cómo? ¿Por qué? No acepto esas cosas...Yo no puedo...” (personal communication, February 14, 2014). She was not the only one to speak like this, as others too repeated similar rhetorical questions. This trend points to the difficulty that exists amongst those who have taken it upon themselves to carry on this movement to understand and process such a traumatic and multifaceted issue as the disappearances in Argentina. The fact that, despite exhaustive investigations and years that have passed thinking and talking about it, there are some things that remain unclear to this day. This lack of clarity, described by interviewees as an inability to comprehend in general terms, can be understood through the elaboration of the different types of “knowing” in Spanish. Elucidating these differences will begin to clarify this difficulty for the Madres, given the disjuncture between the types of “knowing” that the dominant frames emphasize versus the type that they are concerned about.

4.7 What is Left Unknown: Two Different Ways of Knowing, Saber vs. Conocer

There is no doubt that “truth” is a key part of the Madres movement. Truth, however, is a
slippery idea, that is constructed as much as it is given. In any case, knowledge is an important component of truth. This means that a definition of “knowledge” or how one comes to “know” profoundly impacts their idea of “truth.” In Spanish, there is a marked difference both linguistically and cognitively between two different ways of “knowing” which I find useful and revelatory. First is to know something by heart, including learning skills and memorizing information. This is expressed using the verb saber. Here is a definition from the Real Academia Española:

saber. (Del lat. sapère).
1. tr. Conocer algo, o tener noticia o conocimiento de ello. Supe que se había casado. No sé ir a su casa.
2. tr. Ser docto en algo. Sabe geometría.
4. intr. Estar informado de la existencia, paradero o estado de alguien o de algo. ¿Qué sabes de tu amigo? Hace un mes que no sé de mi hermano.
5. intr. Ser muy sagaz y advertido.
6. intr. Dicho de una cosa: Tener sabor.
7. intr. Dicho de una cosa: Agradar o desagradar.

The following two-part entry is found in a Spanish-English dictionary for the word “saber,”

1) saber m. knowledge, learning, information: según me leal saber y entender, to the best of my knowledge.
2) saber tr. to know [have cognizance of; be appraised or informed of],... 2 to know [possess in the memory]... 3 to know, be able, know how, can... 4 tr. & intr. ~ ir a, ~ a, to know the way to: yo sé ir a su casa... 5 intr. to know: a ~, namely, viz., to wit; que yo sepa, to my knowledge, as far as I know; ¿quién sabe?, perhaps, who knows?... 6 to be learned, informed.

Contrarily, in the Spanish language there is another kind of deeper knowing which uses an

68 More on this in Chapter five, section entitled “Truth / Verdad.”
69 http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=saber
altogether different verb: conocer. This includes knowing more intimately people and places, feelings and relationships, and is defined in the following way:

conocer. (Del lat. cognoscère).
1. tr. Averiguar por el ejercicio de las facultades intelectuales la naturaleza, cualidades y relaciones de las cosas.
2. tr. Entender, advertir, saber, echar de ver.
3. tr. Percibir el objeto como distinto de todo lo que no es él.
4. tr. Tener trato y comunicación con alguien. U. t. c. prnl.
5. tr. Experimentar, sentir. *Alejandro Magno no conoció la derrota.*
6. tr. Tener relaciones sexuales con alguien.
7. tr. desus. Confesar los delitos o pecados.
8. tr. desus. Mostrar agradecimiento.
10. prnl. Juzgarse justamente.\(^71\)

The English equivalent is given as such,

conocer m. to know [by the senses or by the mind; to discern, distinguish; to recognize; to have immediate experience of; to be appraised of; to be familiar with]. 2 to be or get acquainted with, to meet [a person]. 3 LAW to have cognizance of: *el juez que conoce la causa or de la causa,* the judge who tries the case. 4 to know [carnally]. 5 to own, avow. – 6 intr. ~ de, to be versed in. – 7 ref. to know oneself. 8 to be or get acquainted with each other, to meet. ¶ CONJUG. like agradecer.\(^72\)

Questions of truth for the Madres, and I think also for other cases to be elaborated shortly, are more matter of conocer than of saber. They do not seek data, bits of information subtracted from context and thus devoid of meaning. What they demand is something more: to know not only what happened but also to understand why it happened. They demand the truth, not the information. This is what is at the heart of their pleas that remain unanswered even after 37 years. Although over time they have managed to create for themselves a semi-coherent story to

\(^{71}\) [http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=conocer](http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=conocer)

justify (at least outwardly) why their sons and daughters were taken, these involve complex individually and collectively fabricated narratives about social change and revolutionary action that cannot substitute fully for the truth they are seeking. Still unresolved is a full reckoning of the brutality of the dictatorship that has been shrouded in secrecy and remains devoid of logic or reason. Also inexplicable is the world economic system that was conducive to such events, in conjunction with a national political environment that allowed for it all to take place, and topped off with an incapacitated citizenry all too willing to look the other way.

Looking at the ways that society and the state/government have tried to reconcile what happened during those years, there is an endless stream of attempts at closure by giving the illusion of a complete picture by means of scientific rigor and full application of the law. Military trials; CONADEP and the report *Nunca más*; reparations; the (later repealed) amnesty laws; and more recently the politically-motivated\(^3\) renaissance of all types of projects aimed at commemorating the era such as, turning the Ex-ESMA into the *Espacio memoria y derechos humanos* (which houses twelve pseudo cultural centre all run by various organizations dedicated to the victims of the dictatorship); and, the extensive *Parque de memoria* in central Buenos

\(^3\) I say “politically-motivated” here purposefully, although I realize it is an inflammatory word choice, and so I will offer a brief justification. I have a theory, based on my experiences in Argentina and my understanding of the political history of the country, that the Kirchner administrations took a calculated decision to embrace the collective project of remembering the past, in which the Madres play a central role. This appears to me as a pragmatic maneuver on their part, since the earlier democratically elected governments had basically created the environment for an all-out war of attrition with the “human rights/familiares organizations.” Néstor Kirchner recognized that public opinion was swaying in support of groups such as the Madres, and therefore made a pragmatic decision to embrace them, thus neutralizing a potentially great oppositional force. This also reduces the ability for these groups to look to the government as responsible, displacing blame by acting “benevolently” towards these groups for the first time since the early days of the Alfonsín government. This would suggest that the stronger support for the AMPM may have been strategic because they were identified as the more “radical” wing of the movement compared to the LF which was smaller and more moderate in its approach to working with the state. For this reason, the AMPM could have been targeted and courted more than the LF so as to bring under the control of the government one of the most powerful opponents, explaining the vast difference in resources between the two organizations.
Aires, just to name the most prominent iterations of this trend. These are all part and parcel of the official work aimed at telling the “whole story.” But, as was shown in the analysis of their slogans and will be further explained in the next chapter, it is highly questionable whether these efforts are able provide answers to the questions for which the Madres continue to agitate. Have they have been able to resolve or simply quell their demands for truth, justice and memory? I propose that although they may provide some answers in the order of saber these efforts remain illogical and ultimately unhelpful since they do not offer ways for the relatives of the disappeared (and the public) to conocer the truth and as such they are unable to offer resolution, or ‘justice’ of the type being sought.

The larger questions concern the Madres’ (and by extension the public) perception of logic and reason, fairness and responsibility. Is it fair to ask or expect them to move on without “knowing”? Is this even possible? What if the sort of “truth” they clamour for is not achievable? Given the socio-political and cultural atmosphere resistant to transformative change and the factor of time, it seems the odds are stacked against them. The concept of unthinkability combined with the distinction between ways of knowing indicates why the Madres are not capable of moving forward via the methods proposed by the human rights and gender-identity frames because they cannot conceive of taking an action that does not entail conocer what happened during this dark time in the history of Argentina. As per the definitions given above, this would require a full awareness through the senses and not just the mind; it follows from understanding and giving primacy to the relationships between those involved, by distinguishing between victims as individuals and proclaiming as valuable each one for their own uniqueness; and also includes knowing oneself, and acting “authentically.” Although there is certainly some
saber-ing to be done, for them there is no doubt a certain value in some forms of information. However, the saber that seems important to them is that which they hold already: the memories they cherish of their lost children. They hold on dearly to the anecdotes about their children—funny things they said, good deeds they did—and stories about their experiences mothering. This is in essence a case of “saber de memoria” or “to know by heart.” This knowing is crystalized deep within each of them. No amount of judicial proceedings or forensic evidence will render it any more complete. On the other hand, the saber that is implied through the learning of specific facts and the collection of data, by being informed or notified of information concerning an individual case, although perhaps an important piece of the puzzle, is not nearly satisfactory and for this reason raises the ire of some Madres (mainly those within the LF) who do not see this route as gaining the knowledge they need to get to the issues that matter most.

### 4.8 Making Connections: Similarly Unthinkable Cases

Although it is true that framing practices draw attention to an issue, making it politically salient and morally uncontestable it is clearly not the frames themselves that allow for the resolution of a problem⁷⁴ they are merely lenses through which to look at an event. As such, framing as human rights- or identity-based issue is in no way a guarantee of satisfactory action nor does it provide a pathway to the type of “truth” commonly being sought. This can be seen with respect to other traumatic events which are similarly framed to the exclusion of alternative understandings. At least officially, it seems that the frame has frequently come to displace the

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⁷⁴ “Resolution” of course would require a case-by-case rather than a one-size-fits-all definition, but here I am defining it as the achievement of the Madres primary and secondary goals, linked expressly through the demand for “truth, memory and justice”. For more on this see chapter five.
actual persons involved, in the sense that it becomes important to “investigate rights abuses” but does not lead to a restitution of “natural caring” via “ethical caring” (see Noddings, 2010).

Establishing the violation of a right or contravention of a norm takes precedence over understanding who is affected, how, and why. The fact alone of abuse becomes the focus in a perverse, sensationalist way, offering an answer to what while casting aside trickier questions of how and why. In other words leaving unexamined the structural causes that led to said “abuses.” As Meister contends, 75

A perverse effect of a globalized ‘ethic’ of protecting human rights is to take the global causes of human suffering off the political agenda...Any violent action taken against global injustice thus runs the risk of being considered a violation of universal human rights (perhaps even ‘terrorism’) in the locality where it occurs. In this way, the global primacy of ethics crystallizes around our horror at the inhuman act...rather than, for example, the unjust international distribution of wealth or the harmful effects of global climate change” (2011, p. 47, emphasis added).

There are several cases I identify which, although addressed using these frames, display a questioning similar to what I have described in relation to the Madres providing evidence that this type of thinking might actually be more predominant than otherwise imagined. The cases that are framed as human rights-based issues include the Truth Commissions set up in Brazil and Chile to investigate their respective dictatorships and their counterpart in Canada established to investigate the Residential Schools. The cases to be analyzed that are framed as identity-based issues include the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 and the sinking of a South Korean ferry, both of which occurred in Spring 2014. All these cases have been hotly contested because of strongly held public sentiments on such matters often coupled with a mistrust of government and a perceived lack of transparency in the political process and handling of the

75 More on this in chapter five.
4.8.1 Human Rights Framed Cases: Truth Commissions

A Canadian Truth Commission

The issue of Residential Schools and the Truth Commission initiated in Canada has resurfaced in the media of late due to the completion this spring of nearly four years of hearings ("Truth and reconciliation", 2014). The Commission was established as a result of a lawsuit against the federal government in 2007, which saw the State finally offer an official apology to the Indigenous people who were victims of these institutions (ibid). The Commission has been dogged by controversy, including allegations of the federal government hindering data collection by withholding key records and producing misleading “narratives” of the institutions under investigation (Roman, 2014), and flawed methods for reviewing records due to insufficient resources to deal with the sheer volume of records involved despite an extension of the Commission’s mandate by a full year (“Huge number of records”, 2014). Tellingly, the man heading the Commission felt the need to publish an opinion piece re-iterating the function of the Commission as a long-term collaborative effort in a special opinion article entitled “Reconciliation not an opportunity to ‘get over it’” (Sinclair, 2014). What this points to is an underlying belief on the part of society that such proceedings represent the ‘final word’ on the matter, closing the book on a past many would prefer not to acknowledge at all.

Truth Commissions in Latin America

In the Latin American cases, there has been much resistance from the public and other
dissenters when (sometimes after less than exhaustive investigations) the Truth Commission presents its findings on the facts surrounding the deaths of several important figures, from Chilean ex-President Salvador Allende (“Chile inquiry confirms”, 2011; “Chile: Court closes probe”, 2014) and poet Pablo Neruda (“No poison found”, 2013), to ex-President Juscelino Kubitschek in Brazil (“Brazil ex-president”, 2014). In the Brazilian case, the most recent Truth Commission conclusions directly contradict those of a previous Commission which had also investigated the suspicious circumstances of the former President’s death in 1976 in an apparent automobile accident. This indicates that there is a lack of consensus even amongst those involved in the processes. And yet, despite their ambiguous outcomes, Truth Commissions remain a common method of dealing with a past atrocity or abuse of power, with Colombia being the most recent country to announce that it too, will be establishing such an apparatus, stating that “The ‘victims of human rights abuses’ have the right to truth, justice, compensation and a guarantee this will never happen again” (“Colombian government”, 2014). However, as we have seen, there remains significant doubt that such a process can truly attain these goals.

4.8.2 Identity Framed Cases: Recent Tragedies

Turning to identity-framed issues exemplify a relevance to the Madres movement particularly poignantly. These include the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 and the tragic ferry sinking in South Korea. It is the news coverage of these two stories which has

76 On the rhetoric of “never again” see footnote 5 in this chapter, and for a discussion of the drawbacks of transitional justice mechanisms, including Truth Commissions and the Nunca más report see chapter five, section entitled “Justice / Justicia.”
captured my attention—as it has the attention of much of the world.\textsuperscript{77} What is significant is the way that it has centralized the experiences of the relatives of the victims in a similar manner to discussions surrounding the disappeared in Argentina, based on the shared assumption that, “Son los vínculos más fuertes, con los padres y con los hermanos” (N. Durán, personal communication, February 16, 2014). In these other cases the manner in which the relatives expressions and demands echo (sometimes verbatim) the sentiments of the Madres makes them worth analyzing. Also of note is the similar quickness to defer to the “experts” to “solve” these mysteries through scientific investigative techniques.

\textit{The Disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370}

In terms of the jet that vanished mysteriously on March 8\textsuperscript{th} 2014, the official rhetoric from Malaysian and other authorities gives the impression that if only thorough enough investigations are done by sophisticated mapping, photography and dissection of electronic communications between the plane and the satellites that we will eventually know with some level of certainty “what happened.” An expert involved in the search efforts for the missing plane provides an excellent case in point, stating “‘They get that black box and the mystery is gone. We may not ever know why this happened, but I’ll tell you this, we’ll know what happened accurate to within milliseconds’” (Kwong, 2014). However, it seems that the relatives are contesting the import of such precise evaluations when it comes to uncovering the “truth” in much the same way that the Madres have done. The Malaysian government announcing the plane “ended” in the

\textsuperscript{77} I draw on media coverage of these events because they capture in a compelling way the types of issues of interest to me in terms of their parallels with the Madres, and also due to the events being so recent which makes news basically the only written source available for information on these topics.
Indian Ocean and positing that all passengers “are dead” parallels the efforts on the part of the Argentine government to convince the Madres that their children were dead, the responses to which were very similar in both cases. “[A]ngry relatives shouted ‘Liars!’ in the streets of Beijing...They held banners and shouted, ‘Tell the truth! Return our relatives!’” (“Malaysia Airlines flight MH370: Search resumes”, 2014). While they surely want investigations to be carried out, for the relatives these must be accompanied by attention to other less tangible values, evidenced by their banners which read “‘We want evidence, truth, dignity’ in Chinese, and ‘Hand us the murderer. Tell us the truth!’” (“Malaysia Airlines flight MH370: passengers’ relatives”, 2014). None of these statements, however emotionally-wrought, are unthinking and irrational overreactions, despite efforts on the part of Chinese authorities to paint them as such by calling them “extreme,” “irresponsible” and “not representative of the overall group” (“Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 probe may not determine”, 2014). Rather they represent heart-felt demands for something basic and non-negotiable and an assertion that facts and figures do not
suffice. As one man told a reporter, “I think everyone is more rational now, more rational!” (“Malaysia Airlines flight MH370: passengers’ relatives”, 2014). Indeed, in cases of disappearance the payment of reparations hinges on the signing of a document legally acknowledging the death of the disappeared person, something that has frequently been vehemently rejected by relatives, from Argentina to China. In a recent article, Misra (2014) discusses the implications of disappearance on the mourning process, revealing some key insights.

This is called an “ambiguous loss”, says Pauline Boss, professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota, who treats people undergoing this unique kind of bereavement. There is no physical proof of death - no body - so people cling to the hope that the missing are still alive...The latest news that the plane probably crashed in the southern Indian Ocean, with no survivors, is unlikely to release them from this limbo, she says. There is no closure even if they find definitely that the plane is in the ocean. They still have no body to bury. It will always be ambiguous until remains are found or DNA evidence.

Regarding the time frame, Boss underlines the idiosyncratic nature of healing, stressing that there is no standard approach that will achieve this objective more quickly for everyone equally.

78 On the subject of emotion I’d like to make an observation which although not directly significant to the project at hand still strikes me as important and interesting. Tragic sudden events such as natural disasters, a plane crash, a boat sinking, the disappearance of a person, etc. are unique moments which seem to offer an instance in which the display of intense emotion is for once no longer gendered. Visible in media coverage on cases from around the world, we see a common set of expected emotions that it are socially and culturally acceptable for both male & female relatives & friends to express. These range from shock, sorrow, and desperation, to despair, broken heartedness, anger, and frustration. Note that this is not restricted to tragedies, as it can also be seen in cases of pure joy and euphoria. For example, at weddings, births, and even major sporting events, such exuberant and infectious emotional displays are commonplace. Considering the strong evolutionary and socio-cultural underpinnings of differential displays of emotion in men and women (see Noddings, 2010, pp. 172-73), such circumstances offer a unique window into a scenario of relative gender equality (however fleeting) where both sexes are seen as morally justified in their public reactions because of the authority attributed to closely bonded or biologically related individuals, but this also extends to complete strangers, as is the backbone of the force of solidarity. Hence, this could offer an opportunity to extend this equality and embracing of expression beyond these tragedies or moments of elation. Thinking more about the moral codes that structure social norms and regulate behaviour in times of great joy or sorrow could provide a way of understanding the changing ways we use emotions to process social situations, and act in solidarity with one another to effect change that is somehow “beyond” gender, and probably other identifying categories as well (race, class, ability, age).
— it is a truly individual process of meaning-making. “Telling someone who has a missing relative to simply begin the mourning process is not helpful, she adds, because you cannot push those who are suffering in this way to accept any one scenario. ‘My first question to the family is - what does this mean to you? And you get the answer and you can build on that,’ she says.”

One relative is quoted implying that the scenario is not only a nightmare of epic proportions, but is somehow *unthinkable*: “‘We don’t really have the strength to entertain the possibility of any bad news at the moment’” (Misra, 2014). The author reminds us that it does not have to be the case of a “[c]atastrophic event like 9/11 and the Asian tsunami [which] left many relatives and friends waiting in vain for definitive news,” rather “this kind of loss can also happen when someone walks out the door and never comes back” (Misra, 2014). One of the lead investigators makes a startling point when he stated, “‘At the end of the investigations, we may not even know the real cause. We may not even know the reason for this incident’” (“Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 probe may not determine”, 2014). This admission serves to bolster the notion that no matter how exhaustive the investigation no amount of diagrams or calculations will be enough provide the answers sought by the relatives.

**South Korea Ferry Sinking**

The South Korean ferry sinking on April 16th 2014 leaving more than 300 people dead or missing, the majority young people, also shows striking parallels with the experience of the Madres in Argentina, providing a window into the ability of a person to process the disappearance of a loved one and the contention over how best to go about this. This has implications for understanding how humanity deals with existential questions and the role of
positivist discourses therein. One article described how confusion reigns around such a tragedy, quoting the country’s President as saying it is a scenario that was “legally and ethically unimaginable” (“South Korea ferry: for the families”, 2014). The most gruesome, and potentially telling parallel is the methods of identification of bodies, which leave the families feeling angry at the dehumanization of their loved ones by reducing them to scant descriptors or characteristics such as bodily appearance, clothing and any identifying physical marks such as moles (“South Korea ferry: for the families”, 2014). One article even mentioned that such features were being crudely written on a white board outside the tent where retrieved bodies were being brought, with families left to agonize over whether it was their child identified by his or her “Adidas pants,” “short hair” or “mole on left cheek” (“South Korea ferry: Identified deaths climb to 113”, 2014). A government official was forced to resign upon being lambasted by relatives when he took a photograph of the meeting room where briefings were taking place, with one family member shouting: “‘We are a nervous wreck here, and this is something to commemorate for you?’” (“South Korea ferry: for the families”, 2014). The official response is to represent the issue in legal and scientific terms to make it more conceivable, however this is clearly not to the satisfaction of the relatives. The South Korean Prime Minister resigned over the state’s handling of the tragedy. In his speech he refers ominously to dark forces at work in society that he feels are to blame and invokes the rhetoric of “never again.” Part of his statement reads:

As I saw grieving families suffering with the pain of losing their loved ones and the sadness and resentment of the public, I thought I should take all responsibility as prime minister...There have been so many varieties of irregularities that have continued in every corner of our society and practices that have gone wrong. I hope these deep-rooted evils get corrected this time and this kind of accident never happens again (“PM Chung Hong-won”, 2014).
Could these references to “irregularities,” “wrong practices” and “deep-rooted evils” be synonymous with those aspects of the investigation that the relatives find so appalling? What is clear is this: the investigative techniques are simply not sufficient; something else must be done.

These cases parallel the position of the Madres, by showing that other relatives and friends react in a similar manner when faced with the death/disappearance of a loved one. As Nora explained to me: “Cada familia tiene su modo de laborar este duelo porque este duelo es un duelo sin cuerpo....Es ilógico, y es algo que no se puede aceptar como una cosa normal. Es por lo que se está luchando” (personal communication, February 16, 2014). These cases serve to exemplify a common position on the part of authorities and/or the state to initiate a process of investigation that relatives find offensive and strongly reject. They react against the imposition of a particular way of assessing the situation, of determining cause and effect, and identifying significant facts and details that may be contrary to those that relatives consider to be important.

Often it seems the official policy seeks a swift resolution in order to close a case and move on that relatives find extremely troubling because it is tantamount to complete forgetting, a way of saying that “mejor es olvidar” (N. Coriñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014).

4.9 Conclusion

I guess you’d find...It seems to me
I can’t express my feelings any more

79 “Each family has its way of labouring through this pain because it is a pain without a body...It is illogical, and it is something that one cannot simply accept as a normal thing. It is for this that one fights.” (translation K. Laird Barry).

80 More on forgetting in chapter five section entitled “Justice / Justicia.”
Than I can raise my voice or want to lift
My hand (oh, I can lift it when I have to).
Did you ever feel so? I hope you never.
It’s got so I don’t even know for sure
Whether I am glad, or sorry, or anything.
There’s nothing but a voice-like left inside
That seems to tell me how I ought to feel,
And would feel if I wasn’t all gone wrong

... By good rights I ought not to have so much
Put on me, but there seems no other way.
Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.
He says the best way out is always through.
And I agree to that, or in so far
As that I can see no other way out but through—
Leastways for me—and then they’ll be convinced.

... Bless you, of course you’re keeping me from work,
But the thing is, I need to be kept.
There’s work enough to do—there’s always that;
But behind’s behind. The worst that you can do
Is set me back a little more behind.
I shan’t catch up in this world, anyway.
I’d rather you’d not go unless you must.
—Robert Frost, “A Servant to Servants”
(as cited in Kendall, 2012, pp.104-09)

To conclude, what the case studies above show us is the common societal response to
different tragedies. These cases parallel the responses to and of the Madres in ways that are both
striking and revelatory, expanding the applicability of work done on this movement to other
movements around the world. The similarities between the framing of the demands of victims’
relatives struggling to make sense of heretofore unimaginable situations shows a fixed pattern
that does not often diverge, nor is it open to divergence. Those suddenly faced with the tragic
death or disappearance of a loved one, be it by acts of nature, human error, or the result of foul
play, react in similar ways that connote a shared sense of grief and pain, but also a prevailing
need for different understanding, a form of understanding that transcends the situation at hand through deeper knowledge that is not made readily available to them. What is at issue is the type of understanding the framing practices delimit. The type of knowledge being sought by those left behind is constantly framed by human rights discourse as a search for redress through “logic,” the ability to rationally explain and then come to terms with the loss. This frame hinges on universally applicable mechanisms of transitional justice and legal reconciliation. Alternatively—sometimes simultaneously—efforts to frame these tragedies in particular terms, as an issue solely related to and resolvable by the immediate families of the victims, places another set of restrictions on thinking around such cases. Here, the focus becomes the experience of sadness and loss of each person left behind, and the grieving process and redress available to the close relatives in terms of burial rites, economic reparations or legal action against the perpetrator(s) for the loss of the loved one. Both framing practices imply a way of looking at the problem, of addressing and processing it logically and effectively/efficiently, however; the concomitant limitations are rarely discussed. The fact is that efforts at framing in both these ways tend to depoliticize and simplify extremely complex situations. This necessarily glosses over nuances and does not leave room for alternative perspectives. This forecloses a discussion of the power dynamics at play by initiating a conversation that contains a pre-determined and immutable understanding of the variables. What is clear from my work is that many other equally important variables or perspectives are thereby suppressed—these subjugated questions and understandings then do not enter into the conversation, they do not fall under the umbrella of what “counts” and is therefore deserving of inclusion in the official record. As a result, gaps remain. These constitute the unintelligible, the “unknown knowns” as well as the “known unknowns.” A by-
product of this is the continual efforts on the part of groups, be they relatives or otherwise, with some (like the Madres) eventually becoming social movements in their own right, who push for a different way of looking at these situations, demand a wholly different type of knowledge; new forms of truth, memory and justice.

What the Madres are demanding and is exhibited in their stated goals and slogans is not necessarily a desire for the re-instatement/exercise/possession of particular rights—be it natural, human, women’s or otherwise. Although this is clearly a part of what they are doing, it is a means and not an end (in the same way that human rights can be thought of as means to values and not valuable in and of themselves). Rather, they are pushing for the restitution of key values: respect, dignity, and trust; in an altogether different way: a moral order that goes beyond any legal or discursive precepts and that transcends individual and collective interpretations. For this reason, the exigency for “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia” put forth by the LF provides the crucial link between the retrospective goals relating to their children and the prospective goals relating to a ‘better’ future, providing the last missing connection. It is through the struggle for truth, justice and memory that they see themselves as working towards these values. Their struggle is one of balancing the definite and the indefinite, the finite and the infinite. They strive to define for themselves the means by which they can establish these values within their own communities (and beyond) and live peaceful and dignified lives as they see fit. Within the LF (more so than the AMPM) it is less about fighting for discrete rights (their own as women or mothers; their children’s as human beings). Although identifying these violations is important and potentially useful there are many flaws in this process, as shown above with relation to various Truth and Reconciliation Commissions.
It is here that the transformative potential of the Madres as a movement becomes most obvious, where emotions and connections carry more weight than the logic of facts and figures; and where small displays of solidarity mean more than grand official statements of intentions to carry out sweeping investigations. The similarities of the cases looked at in this chapter demonstrate that Truth Commissions, mapping sea floors, re-creating flight paths, calculating the turning velocity of a listing ship, or establishing the exact overages in weight onboard are not satisfactory, because these are not the means of achieving truth, memory and justice. These values are rather a function of culture, biography & creativity, and are experienced or felt in the order of conocer rather than something that can be learned or informed.

Some things can never be resolved with certainty, or comprehended with logic. These “unthinkable” circumstances demand new perspectives, new interpretive frameworks. The position of the Madres, like that of other relatives and victims of the tragedies discussed, also points to a void that is perhaps impossible to overcome due to this measure of unthinkability. In this sense, the possibility of aporia must be acknowledged—the likelihood that there may never be a fully satisfactory resolution. Nevertheless, there must be a way to move forward without absolute or total understanding, without the neat bow of logic as a finishing touch, marking the case closed. This entails acknowledging the limitations and fallibility of humanity and carrying on in the face of uncertainty. To walk blindly through the dark, knowing not what you are looking for, but doing so regardless, knowing that others are doing the same. Just being, together, but separately is a lesson to be gleaned from this tenacious and so often misunderstood social movement. After all, they say ‘it is the journey, not the destination.’ Or better still, that ‘the best way out is through.’ This last phrase is especially apt, for it derives from Robert Frost’s “A
Servant to Servants,” quoted above. This poem is “often described as a study of a woman on the edge of madness [but] portrays a character too self-knowing in her diagnoses for that assessment to ring quite true. She may be exhausted and enervated, but she is extraordinarily articulate” (Kendall, 2012, p. 111). It is a rambling monologue of a sad and lonely woman, unhappy in her life and wholly ambivalent about the chances of improving her lot. Yet she remains assertive and compassionate, belying an agency still intact. She has clearly not resigned herself completely to a life she is not happy with, and despite an inability to change things much, one still senses a determination in her words to do something. Importantly, she is still able to reflect critically, to engage with her fate that seems at once destined, but may be altered yet. The Madres embody this character in their refusal to give up. In being both hopeless and hopeful, in their failure and success, in their persistence in the face of great hardship and balking expectations by continually struggling for change and adapting, constantly branching out in new directions while remaining tenaciously dedicated to a simple demand: Aparición con vida. Bring them back alive. How is this possible? It is, and it is not. But through Memoria, Verdad y Justicia they provide a pathway that just might accomplish this goal. Memory. Truth. Justice. Nothing more. Nothing less.
CHAPTER 5 – Slogan Reconceived: Exploring the Meaning of “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia”

“When blocked by contesting social or governmental forces, the subjectivity, the desire and the will of the women and men who are struggling to materialize memory look for alternative channels of expression, renewing their strength. There is no pause, no rest, because memory has not been deposited anywhere; it has to remain in the minds and hearts of the people. The issue of transforming personal feelings, which are unique and cannot be transferred easily to others, into public and collective meanings, is then left open and active.”

(Jelin, 2007a, p. 148)

“When dentro de esta lucha, que era por ‘aparición con vida’, después cuando pasaron muchos años, y nos dimos cuenta de que, bueno...con vida...Después que termina la dictadura y los desaparecidos no aparecen, ya está claro que los desaparecidos no estaban con vida. Entonces empieza la búsqueda de verdad y de justicia, y de hacer memoria.”

—Nora Cortiñas, Madre de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora

5.0 Introduction

On the website of the LF can be read the following phrase: “Para verdad y justicia con memoria.” This is an adaptation of the call that has become one of the most prominent slogans of the LF branch of the Madres movement: “MEMORIA VERDAD Y JUSTICIA” their banners and pamphlets proclaim in boldfaced font. Although the meaning of this slogan could be assumed based on the basic definition of each of the words it contains, upon understanding more in-depth both the Argentine case and the Madres movement, the danger of narrow interpretations and assumptions has been made clear, as complexities abound. What is more, these words have become “catch phrases” for all familiares and human rights organizations across Argentina.

81 “Within this struggle, that was for ‘bringing them back alive,’ after many years passed and we realized that, well, alive....After the dictatorship ended and the disappeared did not reappear, then it became clear that the disappeared were not alive. So then began the search for truth and for justice, and remembering/making memory.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
including being employed frequently by the government and the popular media. As such, Argentine society has become saturated—almost bombarded—with such slogans, watering down their meaning through overuse.\textsuperscript{82} Also, the words themselves (truth, memory and justice) are highly contestable terms in their own right, to say nothing of the challenge linguistically between Spanish and English. Due to these numerous challenges, it is critical to look at this topic carefully, analyzing the individual components first, then the slogan as a whole, to glean its significance. I argue that this slogan holds special promise for understanding the Madres movement by linking their retrospective and prospective demands and leaving space for the alternative conceptions, clarified through the notion of intelligibility and ways of knowing, that are not possible through the human rights or identity frames.

\textit{5.1 How the Slogan is Typically Framed: A Brief Overview}

In their own ways, both human rights and the maternal-, gender-identity frames propose a means of achieving “truth, memory and justice.” The human rights frame focuses on \textit{justice} and \textit{truth} positing that these can be achieved by employing a rational, legalistic approach. This implies that there is a single “truth” that can be reached by these legal or scientific means (trials, exhumations), and that once this truth is documented “justice” can be been done (reparations paid, the guilty given a fair trial in the court of law). Memory comes into play in the guise of documenting cases of abuse, mainly through individual recollections, thus it takes a decidedly testimonial form that centers on a factually based account of specific experiences. What can be

\textsuperscript{82} Nora Cortiñas corroborated this, stating that “El tema de derechos humanos usado por el estado traje mucha confusión” (personal communication, February 16, 2014). Also, Mimi Durán noted that “hay cosas que el gobierno no hace de derechos humanos” (personal communication, February 16, 2014).
taken from this frame as useful for the Madres is the notion of a moral code, and the important role morality plays in the struggle for these values.

From a gender perspective, justice will center on the acknowledgement and rectification of discrimination done to the persons or group, with a special attention paid to the abuse and mistreatment suffered by women specifically on account of their gender identity. Truth and memory are the purview of each woman individually, as no two experiences will be exactly the same. This frame makes an important addition that is lacking from the human rights frame: it makes room for social relations; giving space necessary for the elaboration of “the collective” in memory practices that are crucial when discussing the importance of memory vis-à-vis a particular group (or movement) as well as an entire society. The subjective and collective experience of “women” and “mothers,” and the interrelation between people are a key part in conceptions of truth and the formation of memory within longstanding social movements like the Madres. This frame however, privileges the experience of victims or afectados along gendered lines. Overall, both of these frames, while each makes its own important contributions, do not entirely capture what is meant by the struggle for “memory, truth and justice” that the Madres movement embodies and symbolizes.

5.2 Alternative Conceptions

5.2.1 Memory / Memoria

NOUN
1. The faculty by which the mind stores and remembers information:
   “I’ve a great memory for faces”
[mass noun]: “the brain regions responsible for memory”
1.1 The mind regarded as a store of things remembered:
   “he searched his memory frantically for an answer”
2. Something remembered from the past:
   “one of my earliest memories is of sitting on his knee”
   [mass noun]: “the mind can bury all memory of traumatic abuse”
2.1 The remembering or commemoration of a dead person:
   “clubs devoted to the memory of Sherlock Holmes”
2.2 [mass noun] The length of time over which a person or event continues to be remembered:
   “the worst slump in recent memory”
3. The part of a computer in which data or program instructions can be stored for retrieval
3.1 A computer’s capacity for storing information:
   “the module provides 16Mb of memory”

memoria. (Del lat. memoria).
   1. f. Facultad psíquica por medio de la cual se retiene y recuerda el pasado.
   2. f. En la filosofía escolástica, una de las potencias del alma.
   3. f. Recuerdo que se hace o aviso que se da de algo pasado.
   4. f. Exposición de hechos, datos o motivos referentes a determinado asunto.
   5. f. Estudio, o disertación escrita, sobre alguna materia.
   6. f. Relación de gastos hechos en una dependencia o negociado, o apuntamiento de otras cosas, como una especie de inventario sin formalidad.
   7. f. Monumento para recuerdo o gloria de algo.
   8. f. Obra pía o aniversario que instituye o funda alguien y en que se conserva su memoria.
   9. f. Fís. Dispositivo físico, generalmente electrónico, en el que se almacenan datos e instrucciones para recuperarlos y utilizarlos posteriormente.
   10. f. pl. Libro o relación escrita en que el autor narra su propia vida o acontecimientos de ella.
   11. f. pl. Relación de algunos acaecimientos particulares, que se escriben para ilustrar la historia.
   12. f. pl. Libro, cuaderno o papel en que se apunta algo para tenerlo presente.
   13. f. pl. Saludo o recado cortés o afectuoso a un ausente, por escrito o por medio de tercera persona.
   14. f. pl. Dos o más anillos que se traen y ponen de recuerdo y aviso para la ejecución de algo, soltando uno de ellos para que cuelgue del dedo.
   conservar la ~ de algo.
   1. loc. verb. Acordarse de ello, tenerlo presente.
   hacer ~.
   1. loc. verb. Recordar, acordarse

83 http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/memory?q=memory
84 http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=memoria
On working for memory: “[Trabajar [en este sentido] es gratis. Se puede decir militar, también...Trabajar todos los días por la memoria es de alguna manera tenerlo presente y transmitirlo, hablar con cualquiera en cualquiera situación...Cuando vos militas o trabajas por la memoria, trabajas en cualquier ámbito permanentemente. Yo no estoy traumatizada y llo...]{85}”

–Noémi (Mimi) Durán, supporter of Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora

According to the definitions above the word “memory” contains numerous meanings and has several usages depending on the context and intention. For the Madres, memory seems to be more of an action or practice (remembering, to remember) than a noun (a memory) as the definitions suggest. Elizabeth Jelin writes extensively on the issues of memory and remembering in post-dictatorship Argentina (1998, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). Her writing shows the highly complex nature of memory in places affected by political conflict and severe state-sponsored repression. She offers insights into the role of different forms and sites of memory (2007a), the construction of truth and role of “legitimate” memory-holders (2007a, 2007b & 2011b), and the implications of human rights discourse as the “dominant interpretive framework”

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85 “Working [in this sense] is free. One could also say serving/being active in...Working every day for memory is in some way keeping it present and transmitting it, speaking with whoever in whatever situation...When you become active in the struggle or work for memory, you work in any place permanently. I am not traumatized and crying on the street corners forever because my sister is a desaparecida. But yes, I keep in mind that what occurred was an injustice, it was genocide and they were not just anyone, those who disappeared. It was not little old men of seventy who played cards in the local bar. Those people, it was not. With all due respect to the elderly, please! Rather, in order to implement, to implant a government, an economic and laboral system of the utmost level of exploitation they have to disappear those who opposed, those who had the clarity to see. It wasn’t just anyone. So working for memory is keeping in mind/keeping present those events, transmitting them, reading, and learning even more.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
being applied to cases that involve struggles over truth, memory and justice, as is the case in
Argentina especially (2009 & 2011a). It is through her writing that the nuances and intricacies of
these terms become visible with an unprecedented clarity, providing an alternative way
understanding their meaning. For Jelin memory plays a crucial interpretive role:

We start with a concept of memory that refers to the ways in which people construct
sense or meaning of the past, and how they relate that past to their present in the act of
remembering...the sharing of an experience involves the existence and putting in motion
of a cultural interpretive framework and a meaningful language that enables us to
conceptualize, think and express such experience (Jelin, 2007a, p.141).

This view of memory contains both an individual facet, as in the remembering of a specific loved
one, and a collective facet, as in societal consciousness and historical memory making it a multi-
scalar process: “these struggles unfold on various institutional, symbolic and subjective
levels” (Jelin, 2007a, p. 140).

In all cases, memory entails knowledge, knowing someone or something, and a choice
about how best to represent that knowledge, how to maintain the essence of that person or thing
in the present and into the future. Commemorating the memory of the disappeared is a major
point of contention in present-day Argentina. The governmental response of late has been to
attempt to gain complete control over any and all related activities, so as to define the memory
according to a political agenda. As Nora attested, “La Presidenta quería agarrar todos los sitios
de la memoria y manejarlos desde el propio gobierno. Yo no estoy de acuerdo, Mirta tampoco.
No estamos de acuerdo” (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014). Writing
about commemoration as a key aspect of memory work, Jelin brings up several key questions
about temporality. For her, the vehicles of memory such as memorial sites, plaques,
commemorative holidays and festivals act to bridge the past and present in a way that is
extremely significant. She wonders,

[C]an past and present be separated? Could it be possible to face such profound shifts in the meaning of a date that the original reason becomes only a pretext for political and social struggles related to the present? Are the events and activities that are carried out really commemorations of past events? Or are they vehicles of a current political struggle?” (2007a, p. 146)

Her discussion around questions of time shows how memory is a critical link in the connection between the retrospective and prospective demands of the Madres. Since,

Territorial markers are the product of human will and human agency, resulting from the initiative and the commitment of social groups acting as memory entrepreneurs. At any given historical moment, their action involves an attempt to link their interpretations of the past to their views about the future, through their double will to pay homage to victims and to convey a message to the new generations (Jelin, 2007a, p. 147).

Importantly, memory is conceived here not as a noun, but as a verb, a “labour” that is done by individuals and groups: “The markers are not memory itself, but vehicles and material supports for the subjective labors of memory, for collective action and for reaffirmation of collective identities” (Jelin, 2007a, pp. 147-48). The Madres want to remember many things: their particular children; the “generation” stolen; the circumstances that led to the disappearances; their own (re)actions and the (re)actions of others; their eventual coming together to form a resistance to the military repression; the alliances and friendships they have made; and, the many hurdles they have overcome along the way. Their decision to “make memory,” especially as an active “remembering” is a conscious choice that is a key part of their activist identities, rather than an inevitable negative outcome of dwelling on the past, as has been suggested.

There remains contention within advocates of this form of active/ist remembering as to who are the bearers of memory, and how to remember properly. The questions of whose voice counts, or who/what is authorized as a legitimate voice/vehicle of memory are addressed at
length by Jelin. She writes of there being, “different and even contradictory interpretations of the same past events, not only among winners and losers in the conflicts, or victims and perpetrators, but also among each of the sides of the conflict” (2007a, p. 146). As a result, she claims that there are always memory practices that are deemed “correct” or “incorrect.” She explains how this categorization results in significant reductionism since, “The authority for the ‘correct’ ways to remember is in the hands of the more powerful...This involves a certain degree of ‘standardization’ and ‘universal homogenization’ of the definition of suffering and victimhood, one that blurs or erases the specificity of each cultural milieu” (Jelin, 2011a, p. 212). This brings out another fundamental idea from Jelin on memory: that only particular people have the knowledge and therefore the ability to shape and transmit memories. This entails questions surrounding the formation of truth, and shows truth and memory to be profoundly interconnected. This is an issue that is particularly acute in a country where, We are not faced with a confrontation between different interpretations of dictatorship. It is not between the defenders of the military and the victims; neither between left and right, progressives and conservatives. It is a story of center and periphery; a story of class and race...This is part of the “cultural silences” of Argentina (Jelin, 2011a, 204-05).

Clearly memory-making is a highly contested terrain in Argentina, one in which, “Power relations and the claim of hegemony are always present. It is a struggle for ‘my truth,’ with advocates, memory entrepreneurs and attempts to appropriate (and at times monopolize) meanings and interpretations. Struggles around legitimacy of voice and truth are involved” (Jelin, 2007a, p. 141). These struggles contain a strong element of dignity, in that when a person’s (or group’s, collective’s, society’s) memory is recognized as real and not a fabrication, their contribution to the “whole” story is acknowledged and valued by being granted
the status of “truth,” thereby restoring their sense of self-worth and the perception of them as a person deserving of respect.\textsuperscript{86}

\textbf{5.2.2 Truth / Verdad}

\textbf{NOUN}

1. [mass noun] The quality or state of being true:
   \begin{quote}
   “he had to accept the truth of her accusation”
   \end{quote}

1.1 (also \textbf{the truth}) that which is true or in accordance with fact or reality:
   \begin{quote}
   “tell me the truth”
   “she found out the truth about him”
   \end{quote}

1.2 [count noun] A fact or belief that is accepted as true:
   \begin{quote}
   “the emergence of scientific truths”
   “the fundamental truths about mankind”\textsuperscript{87}
   \end{quote}

\textbf{verdad}. (Del lat. ver\textipa{\textacute{t}}itas, -\textipa{\textacute{t}}is).

1. f. Conformidad de las cosas con el concepto que de ellas forma la mente.
2. f. Conformidad de lo que se dice con lo que se siente o se piensa.
3. f. Propiedad que tiene una cosa de mantenerse siempre la misma sin mutación alguna.
4. f. Juicio o proposición que no se puede negar racionamente.
5. f. Cualidad de veraz. \textit{Hombre de verdad}
6. f. Expresión clara, sin rebozo ni lisonja, con que a alguien se le corrige o reprende. U. m. en pl. \textit{Cayetano le dijo dos verdades}
7. f. realidad (‖ existencia real de algo).

~ moral.

1. f. verdad (‖ conformidad de lo que se dice con lo que se piensa)\textsuperscript{88}

Truth is perhaps the most slippery of the three terms under consideration. This is because

\textsuperscript{86} I am grateful to Helen Mack Chang, a renowned human rights activist from Guatemala who, in a recent talk at the University of Guelph highlighted the importance of dignity to memory. The significance of survivors being recognized and playing a role in the production of truth shows that the “official record” is not strictly oppressive and reductive but also a key part of societal and personal healing (personal communication, June 11, 2014).

\textsuperscript{87} http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/truth?q=truth

\textsuperscript{88} http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=verdad
it is very commonly employed, but rarely is its meaning explored. It is the most “given” of the
terms, as is clear by the definitions which reflect that “truth” simply means fact, the good and
undisputable reality, in contrast with fiction, the evil, disputable illusion or lie. According to
these definitions there is believed to be only one truth (“the truth”) in any given case. This
binaristic definition however, presents a false dichotomy. The positivistic logic that suggests such
an opposition does not entirely correspond to the meaning implied by the Madres’ demands for
truth as it is too limited. Contrarily, a postmodern definition of truth as multiple, subjective, and
changing, is better suited to explain its usage by the Madres.

Most obviously, for the Madres ‘truth’ is clearly contested, as there are different
interpretations offered within the movement itself,89 and their rendition(s) of what is “true” has at
times been at odds with official history and in direct contradiction with the truth presented by the
military and its supporters. The official record or “archive” (one form of memory according to
Jelin 2007a) of the truth about the Dirty War is allegedly contained in the CONADEP report, but
the Madres have repeatedly maintained that the whole truth is yet to be told. Mirta, referred to
the Madres’ role in demonstrating the falsity of “la historia,” and their desire to show “que hay
una realidad, hay una verdad,” by which she means that each victim or afectado has their own
story to tell, their own “verdad” that the official version did not capture (personal

89 As far as the discrepancy within the movement on what is “true,” it should be noted that the AMPM
holds the majority of the power to create the “official record” of the Madres. Due to their much higher
resources than the LF, this has allowed them to have their own printing press and to enjoy greater access
to reporters, both nationally and internationally. Their radio station and monthly magazine also greatly
increase their reach in the public sphere. This was something strongly spoken against by Nora Cortiñas of
the LF, who was vociferous in her accusations that the AMPM under Hebe de Bonafini had been
spreading lies to tarnish the reputation of the Madres who split, and to create the false impression that the
AMPM were the only and original carriers of the “true” Madres movement ideals (personal
communication, February 16, 2014). The LF have tried (largely unsuccessfully) to counter these attacks,
as seen in their choice of name, to clarify that they are indeed the founding mothers of the movement.
communication, February 14, 2014). It is important to keep in mind the wider discourse of human rights, in order to see why and how the facts in the CONADEP report could be framed—and come to be accepted—as “truth.” Since, “facts take on their meaning by being embedded in frames, which render them relevant and significant or irrelevant and trivial” (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009, p.168), there is clearly a mutual constitution involved here that the presentation of the Nunca más as an objective source of “historical fact” masks.

Crenzel (2011 & 2012) writes extensively on the CONADEP process and the reception of the Nunca más report, calling it an important component in what he terms the “humanitarian narrative” of the disappearances. Crenzel is highly critical of this narrative for its portrayal of the disappearances in a simplistic way by focusing on personal identifiers and removing political affiliations or traces of activism, making all the disappeared appear as “apolitical” and “innocent victims” (2011, p. 1067). The report marks the opening of the floodgates, as from then on the victim’s or afectado’s testimonies are considered as the “true” accounts of the atrocities of the period, eventually “monopolizing the authority of the word” (2011, p. 1070). As Crenzel explains, “By becoming key pieces in the account, these testimonies introduce the narrative of denunciation prevailing among those affected by the disappearances, thus assigning a status of truth to that narrative by making it part of a text created by a State commission” (2011, p. 1069). Jelin also questions the ramifications of framing the victims in familial terms and notes, like Crenzel, the privileged place of the testimony of family members, especially mothers and grandmothers, which in addition to the consequences as regards legitimate memory, also constructs a false dichotomy between those directly affected and regular citizens removed from the situation (Jelin, 2007b, p. 55).
The CONADEP report has been contested by the Madres on some of the same grounds that Jelin and Crenzel touch on. This exemplifies the power struggle inherent in constructions of truth noted earlier. Jelin describes the archive and its increasing preponderance for being shaped by those in power, making it serve a particular political agenda:

The notion of the archive is linked to the idea of protecting and preserving the traces of the past. The passage from current official and private papers and documents to historical archives is marked by the intervention of those who have the power to decide what should be kept and what should be destroyed, usually based on considerations of what is important or valuable vis-à-vis what is defined as trivial. In the western tradition, the symbolic and political importance of the national archive has grown throughout the last two centuries, turning this into a place of affirmation of the nation-state, a place that defines national identity and heritage. Once archives are established, however, controversies arise as to the criteria for inclusion and exclusion” (2007a, p. 152).

By contesting the account contained in the CONADEP report, the Madres recognize the constructed nature of truth and challenge hegemonic ideas of truth that they consider incomplete or otherwise incorrect.

This judgment of right/wrong belies the normative component at work in this concept. For the Madres this is expressed in terms of authenticity, of being truthful to and about oneself, in accordance with the values one holds, rather than being an authoritative holder of the one totalizing truth. As Mirta adamantly insisted, “Vivirlo auténtico. Lo falso, ¡no!” (personal communication, February 14, 2014). Such a conception of truth that challenges hegemonic views, that is determined to push the boundaries of what is considered ‘truth’ and ‘fact,’ poses questions that are difficult or uncomfortable for the status quo. This alternative perception of truth seeks answers to “how?” and “why?” in an attempt to expose the underlying roots of structural/systemic problems. For instance, the Madres push for a definition of truth regarding the disappearances of their children that highlights their revolutionary character. This would
include an acknowledgement that the disappearances were the result of the Junta-led “Proceso,”
which is in turn closely linked to the global economic system, and is just one facet of the
imposition of Western thinking on the Global South that has had hugely detrimental impacts on
countries including, but not limited to, Argentina (see N. Klein, 2007). This broader idea of truth
entails a wider set of causes and effects that must be traced back and made completely clear in
order to be considered “whole.” This is an integral part of what the Madres consider to be the
achievement of “justice.” As Mirta maintained:

Eso es la justicia, las convicciones que uno tiene, que pueden ser equivocados o no, pero
con autenticidad actuar. Manejarnos no con mentiras o burdas o maniobras, cosas que
hacen al menos cabo del ser humano. Lo primero que uno tiene que hacer de alguna
manera a sí mismo, [decir] cómo lo veo yo. ¿Yo voy a decir tal cosa pero me siento otro?
Pero ¡no! ¡Me siento mal! Yo tengo que ser sincera conmigo misma. Porque si respetarme
yo...Si no me respeto, ese otro ‘yo’ que tenemos...Si no lo respeto yo no voy a respetar
a nadie porque primera está mi persona como essencia de un ser humano (personal
communication, February 14, 2014).

Although it is not unusual for truth to be linked to justice in this way, proponents of a more
narrow interpretation of these concepts based on human rights discourse centre these demands on
formal legal principles, reducing it to a matter for handling by the courts and (for issues of
constitutionality) the state. As one proponent of this perspective writes, “The right to truth can be
considered a part of the broader right to justice due to victims of crimes against
humanity” (Montes, 2009, p. 140). In this way intertwining, but also subsuming in a reductive
way, truth within justice.

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90 “That is justice, the convictions that one holds, that can be wrong or not, but acting with authenticity. Comporting oneself not with lies or crudeness or ploys, things that are the worst of human beings. The first thing that one needs to do for themself, is [to say] how I see it. Am I going to say one thing but feel another? But no! I would feel badly! I need to be sincere with myself. Because respecting myself...If I don’t respect myself, the other ‘self’ that we have...If I don’t respect it myself I am not going to respect anybody because first and foremost is myself as a person, this is like the essence of a human being.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
5.2.3 Justice / Justicia

"Sin justicia, no tenemos nada."

"Como algo primordial, algo como essencia de la vida, o del ser humano, de la humanidad, como un símbolo de respaldo, es la justicia. Es lo que de alguna manera puede prevalecer en el mundo."  

—Mirta Baravalle, Madre de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora

NOUN
1. [mass noun] Just behaviour or treatment:
   “a concern for justice, peace, and genuine respect for people”
1.1 The quality of being fair and reasonable:
   “the justice of his case”
1.2 The administration of the law or authority in maintaining this
   “a tragic miscarriage of justice”
2. A judge or magistrate, in particular a judge of the Supreme Court of a country or state.  

justicia. (Del lat. iustitia).
   1. f. Una de las cuatro virtudes cardinales, que inclina a dar a cada uno lo que le corresponde o pertenece.
   2. f. Derecho, razón, equidad.
   3. f. Conjunto de todas las virtudes, por el que es bueno quien las tiene.
   4. f. Aquello que debe hacerse según derecho o razón. Pido justicia.
   5. f. Pena o castigo público.
   6. f. Poder judicial.
   7. f. Rel. Atributo de Dios por el cual ordena todas las cosas en número, peso o medida. Ordinariamente se entiende por la divina disposición con que castiga o premia, según merece cada uno.
   8. f. desus. Ministro o tribunal que ejerce justicia.
   10. f. ant. alguacil (‖ oficial inferior de justicia).
   11. m. justicia mayor de Aragón.
   12. m. desus. justicia mayor de Castilla.

~ conmutativa.
   1. f. La que regula la igualdad o proporción que debe haber entre las cosas, cuando se dan o cambian unas por otras.

91 “As something primordial, something essential to life, or of a human being, of humanity, as a symbol of support, is justice. It is something that in one way or another could prevail in the world.” (translation K. Laird Barry).

92 http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/justice?q=justice
Justice is the term most strongly associated with the human rights discourse, as it is frequently linked to both morality and law. As such, a rights-based conception of justice tends to preside over discussions surrounding this complex term, marked by the identification of several slightly different types of justice (transitional, retributive, legalistic). There is an automatic association of “justice” in the case of Argentina’s disappeared with transitional justice, given the efforts on the part of the government following democratization which implemented the CONADEP, one of the world’s first Truth Commissions, which are considered the cornerstone of a transitional justice approach. Robert Meister’s *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (2011), takes a highly critical perspective on the impact of contemporary human rights discourse that favors such an approach. Jelin also demonstrates a wariness of human rights discourse, which she calls a “master narrative,” and its concomitant techniques of transitional justice as they have been employed in Argentina. She questions the ability of these processes to provide justice through their particular manner of “settling accounts with the past,” asking provocatively: “Is

[^93]: [http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=justicia](http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=justicia)
this narrative the ‘truth’?” (Jelin, 2011a, p. 199; p. 202-04).

The most important piece of evidence that the Madres themselves find this approach lacking is their sustained allegation that the government (even after the transition to democracy) has been largely unsuccessful in achieving justice, prompting them to continue their strident calls for it. Their vision of what justice should look like comes close to the notion of “gender justice” put forth by Reilly (2009) and Walsh (2011) in their respective books on women’s rights. Mirta, Mercedes, Nora and Mimi all emphasized that the governments to date have been “constitutional but not democratic” (with the exception of Mercedes, who believes this trend ended with Néstor Kirchner’s election). The idea that ‘true democracy’ has not yet been established in Argentina is a scathing criticism of the notion from transitional justice that the first steps toward achieving justice are made once power is transferred to the people through a transparent and open electoral process. According to this view, Argentina has been a functioning democracy working resolutely for justice since the transfer of power from the military to a civilian government in 1983. The controversial (now repealed) amnesty laws, and the firmness with which those interviewed adamantly insisted otherwise, are proof enough that this is not the case.

One of the most controversial aspects of a view of justice as transitional is that it initiates the end of the period of atrocity and the beginning of a new chapter. This is a crucial aspect for Meister, who argues that transitional justice rests on a consensus (most importantly between the victims and beneficiaries of a former regime) accepting that the “evil” is past, foreclosing the possibility of broad social change and redress beyond the mandated “reconciliation,” and allowing beneficiaries to maintain their accrued privileges and benefits:

In the twenty-first century the notion of human rights has devolved from an aspirational
ideal to an implicit compromise that allows the ongoing beneficiaries of past injustice to keep their gains without fear of terrorism...For the victim who was morally undamaged or subsequently ‘healed’ or both, the past would be truly over once its horrors are acknowledged by national consensus. This consensus on the moral meaning of the past often comes at the expense of cutting off future claims that would normally seem to follow from it. To put this point crudely, the cost of achieving a moral consensus that the past was evil is to reach a political consensus that the evil is past (Meister, 2011, pp. 24-25).

This thinking is exemplified in the idea of “never again,” the title of the CONADEP report. Meister calls Nunca más a “great document of transitional liberalism,” and suggests that such documents “are almost never about systemic injustice as such. Rather, they are about a narrow class of victims (those who suffered physical torment) and a narrow class of perpetrators (their active tormentors)” (2011, p. 27). Crenzel makes a similar argument about the negative impact of the representation of the victims contained in the report, which limits an understanding of the politicized and systemic nature of the violence: “As Nunca más restores the humanity of the disappeared, this restitution takes on the shape of an abstract humanization, presenting their generic lives, and blurring their conditions as concrete historical beings and their political lives, which are precisely those aspects that underscored the confrontations that divided Argentine society” (2011, p. 1067). What is most troubling about this is the effect it has of individualizing a systemic problem: “The rule of law in the aftermath of evil is expressly meant to decollectivize both injury and responsibility and to redescibe systemic violence as a series of individual crimes” (Meister, 2011, p. 28). As one Madre once put it, “the commission was a way of sending us back to the beginning again, to the individual struggle with everyone involved in their own individual case. We don’t want our struggle to be reduced to a list of separate cases. Our struggle is not about one child, but against a system which crushes all opposition” (Porota as cited in
Fisher, 1993, p. 118). Jelin explicitly links the CONADEP report and the military trials (both prominent examples of transitional justice being applied to the case in Argentina) to human rights discourse, arguing that the way that it ignores the particularity of the victims is indeed troublesome:

The trial showed the systematic nature of repression and involved the collection of a body of information that would become evidence in new indictments. *As before (and after), the dominant interpretive framework was that of systematic human rights violations, made in universal and not in particularistic identity terms*” (Jelin, 2011a, pp. 199-200, emphasis added).

This view is clearly problematic for the Madres as it has implications for how the victims, perpetrators, and affectedos are represented. It also lays out an understanding of the ‘order of operations’ as to how best to proceed by determining what has changed, what remains unchanged but still needs to be, and what should be accepted as unchangeable because it is effectively “over.” Transitional justice “attempts to establish a decisive split between the past and the future so that the present is defined purely as a transitional moment, most narrowly seen as closure, more broadly as reconciliation” (Meister, 2011, p. 31). In this way, it can be seen as inhibiting the formation of a crucial link between past, present and future, expressed through the demand for “memory” explained above. The need to separate time in this way further compounds the illusion of systemic issues as isolated events, thereby allowing deeper problems to continue unexamined and contributing to the culture of impunity. As Meister explains,

In the Human Rights Discourse that has become dominant since the cold war the meaning of ‘evil’ itself has changed. It is no longer widely understood to be a system of social injustice that can have ongoing structural effects, even after the structure is dismantled. Rather, evil is described as a *time* of cyclical violence that is past—or can be *put* in the past by defining the present as another time in which the evil is remembered rather than repeated (2011, p. 25, emphasis in original).
A conception of justice as transitional has clear implications for long-standing social movements like the Madres. The fact that they have continued to push for change indicates that there is something that they have not yet achieved, some ways that the approach taken has not been satisfactory for them. As one Madre asserts, “Ese movimiento sigió porque nunca, estas reclamas que hacíamos nunca fueron escuchados ni respondidos” (M. Baravalle, personal communication, February 14, 2014). At the risk of looking selfish or foolish or both, they have held fast to the position that such a method represents not justice but rather “una falta de justicia,” and is a way to tell society that “mejor es olvidar” (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014). Meister points out these limitations when he explains, “The political effect of recent Human Rights Discourse is thus to marginalize those on both sides who are still willing to fight on. In this social compact, victims get to claim a ‘moral victory’ but only insofar as they are willing to regard it as victory enough” (2011, p. 24, emphasis in original).

This conciliatory aspect of transitional justice is not consistent with the desire for the Madres to continue their struggle indefinitely, to denounce any and all abuses—both isolated and structural, individual and collective—and to draw links between these. One Madre explained how they see their position as incompatible with a transitional justice approach when she insisted, “¿Quién va perdonar la tortura física sobre un ser humano?... No, no, no. No hay perdón. Hay justicia” (N. Cortiñas, personal communication, February 16, 2014).

Given these short-comings of a transitional justice approach and considering its pitiful “success” record conceded even by its proponents (“Despite the steps taken by post-military governments in Argentina, the WGEID acknowledges in it most recent report that, of the 3,445 cases submitted by the Working Group to the Argentine Government, more than 3,300 cases
remain unresolved” [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights as cited in Frey, 2009, pp.64-65]), it is clear that a different approach is required to address this demand. Perhaps more appropriate would be an approach to justice that is needs based, such as the one elaborated through care ethics by Nel Noddings (2010). This version could be better suited to explain how the Madres see the notion of justice and the route to its achievement. Contrarily, the route of transitional justice that emphasizes reconciliation and proposes “forgetting” as a means of obtaining closure is not compatible with the complexity of the Madres’ worldview. As Nora Cortiñas affirmed:

> En el movimiento de Madres lo que quedo siempre fijo es que nosotras luchamos contra la violencia en el sentido total de lo que representa la violencia. La violencia sobre una persona, sobre una creatura indefensas [entonces] que se perdona, el olvido del horror, eso no se da porque los crímenes que se cometieron sobre nuestros hijos e hijas no es tan fácil (personal communication, February 16, 2014).94

5.3 Conclusion

Looking at this slogan it is clear that the Madres’ retrospective goals are indeed closely linked to their prospective goals, and both are captured in the essence of the call for “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia,” which is a never-ending demand for change. Since many of the structural issues that “caused” the disappearances remain intact in the form of military impunity, rampant inequality, and political polarization and corruption, these calls have gone unheeded on the whole. Recent work to support “memory,” and “truth,” and “justice” separately, through the means made available by the adoption of a narrow human rights frame (especially techniques of

94 “In the Madres movement what has remained always fixed is that we fight against violence in the absolute sense of what violence represents. Violence against a person, against a defenseless creature, so the pardon of that, the forgetting of the horror, that cannot be, because of the crimes that they committed against our sons and daughters, it is not that easy.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
transitional justice) and the legitimization of the concerns of relatives (especially the authority of mothers) that results from the imposition of a maternal identity frame, have not sufficiently addressed the demand in its totality. The need for a more all-encompassing response is hinted at by Montes, providing further confirmation that the linking of these concepts on the part of the Madres is indeed unprecedented and transformative:

This duty [to respect and guarantee human rights] falls to all public jurisdictions and specifically to the Judiciary. But it does not propose a merely formal response because the truth demanded by society is ‘that which allows the construction of memory; the memory as the only possibility for rearticulating something that does not imply the reconstruction of archaeological ruins, memory as pure past.’ (Oliveira & Guembe 546) The right to truth is a clear example of the progressive development of human rights...Beyond being a personal right, the right to truth is also a collective right, a prerogative of all of society so that the atrocities of the past cannot be committed again. Nunca más (2009, p. 147).

Despite their separate treatment in this chapter, what I hope to have made clear is how much the Madres see these three terms as intertwined and inextricable, to be kept together at all costs. Due to this mutual constitution, if one is missing the whole effort is jeopardized—they need to be considered as a trinity to have the sought after impact.95 Because, as the Madres contend, it is only through remembering that one can come to know truth and once armed with truth and memory one has created the conditions favourable for the blossoming of justice: “para verdad y justicia, con memoria.”

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95 The complex interconnections between and layers of truth, memory and justice are not limited to the case of the Madres in Argentina. Helen Mack Chang similarly insisted on the inseparability of these terms and the need for a multifaceted and dynamic approach to truth, memory and justice in any efforts aimed at reconciling a traumatic past and striving for a better future. However, she was generally more supportive of the human rights discourse, and especially the techniques of transitional justice, than the views put forth here (personal communication, June 11, 2014).
Conclusion

“Un país que no cuide a sus mayores y no da educación a sus jovenes no tiene memoria ni siquiera futuro. Y sin memoria y sin futuro, no tiene presente.”
—President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Address to the Nation, February 4th 2014

“¡Que se vayan todos!”
—Chant of Argentine protestors during 2001 economic crisis

6.0 Concluding Remarks on the Social and Political Outlook in Argentina

Contrary to the age-old adage “time heals all wounds” it appears tensions do not dissipate naturally in an environment characterized by deeply engrained dogmatism, hostility and vehement prejudice. The sides were drawn up long ago, the battle cries long since shouted from the armaments, and yet the sound lingers. This oppositional stance, black vs. white, us vs. them, is like a second nature in this place, and nowhere is this more clearly displayed as within the Madres movement. They are a modern day allegory of the oppositional character of Argentine politics since time immemorial. And their protest seems to become more not less pressing as time goes on. Tempers flare without warning, and accusations fly helter-skelter, keeping unresolved conflicts like hot open wounds—one winces at the slightest touch. There are nerves there, deep ones. Interrogation of these beliefs is inconceivable, and yet, without such a dialogue the future looks bleak.

The current trend in Argentina of open-armed acceptance of all things “human rights,” and the constant reiteration of the role of “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia” that began with the election of Néstor Kirchner to the presidency in 2003, is a full 180° about-face from the stance of the dictatorship and the governments in the immediate post-dictatorship era. But taking a closer
look, one can see that despite this pragmatic change in approach there are still deep-seated fissures here: cracks in an otherwise bright and shiny facade of celebratory jubilation. The political ‘fault lines’ that are a legacy of 20th century Peronism are alive and well in Argentina despite many years of so-called ‘democracy.’

If hindsight were 20/20, the answers would be clear by now, but many questions remain unanswered. And there is still as much desencuentro and persecución as agreement and harmony within and between political factions and the organismos de derechos humanos. The sad truth is that there is still no allowance for any grey areas in Argentine politics. The years have not carved out a space for acceptance of ambiguity and constructive criticism. But there are some who are trying, as desperately and diligently as when they first went out in search of their children many years ago, to make sense of the past and the present, to create a new vision and practice that will enable human rights and democracy to truly flourish. They have a crucial role to play in building a stronger civil society that holds the government accountable, demanding transparency and fairness so that unity and trust can finally be achieved.

6.1 Conclusions About the Madres Movement

“No recuperamos nuestros hijos pero sí, aquí nadie pueda decir que no sabía como lo decían antes. Nuestra soledad se acabó. Nuestro trabajo solitaria se acabó.”96

—María Marta Ocampo de Vásquez, Madre de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora (Programa de Derechos Humanos, No.8)

What began as a discomfort and a need for clarity grew into a full-fledged assault on the

96 “We may not have recuperated our children but here nobody can say that they do not know like they used to before. Our solitude is over. Our solitary work is over.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
simplistic interpretations of the Madres movement that pervade the literature and have shaped the public consciousness of this long-standing social movement. Along the way, this thesis has discovered that the movement of the Madres can neither be captured under the universal frame of international human rights discourse, nor the gendered particularity of motherhood. The meaning and force of their demand for “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia” does entail components of both of these frames equally, but this is not enough. This is a case where, “tensions emerge between localized meanings and the universal ethics of human rights” (Jelin, 2011a, p. 210), and if we are not attuned to these tensions we risk missing the main point of the action. Their demands are beyond the explanatory capacity of the dominant frames because they entail ways of knowing and understanding that do not adhere to rational logic nor are they simply about the privileged and particular need of a mother to protect her child from harm. The Madres use human rights language on account of its moral force, which is its most prized component, as it is the one most open to interpretation. They interpret truth, justice and memory as the moral capstones that guide their actions. In this way, human rights gives one piece of the puzzle. However, the force of this dominant discourse also lies in its universality and is upheld by rational, instrumental logic that does not fit well with the Madres. The maternal frame gives another piece of the puzzle, adding a much-needed emotional layer that resonates with proponents of feminist and motherist interpretations. However, in trying to compensate for the lack of a clearly “universal” applicability it goes too far in the opposite direction by being saddled with too narrow a particularity. The relationship between a mother and her child, although in some senses clearly a universal phenomenon, remains dogged by the limitations imposed through the inherent subject-object binary, and culturally engrained and socially constructed understanding of what “women”
and “mothers” are, and can be. As I see it, the Madres take the “being” from the discourse of human rights that privileges the “human being,” but discard the generic “human.” They take the idea of the importance of affective bonds from the gender-identity frame, but expand it beyond its usual limits through their conceptions of “socialized motherhood.” Their moral, ethical and practical codes of conduct are expressed through the exigency “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia,” that are concentrated on authenticity, in that each person acts in a way that is true to themselves and that although it may not be exactly consistent with, neither does it do harm to the collective. In this way theirs is neither a totalizing discourse nor an oppressive exercise of disciplinary power. It is neither prescriptive nor reductive, being unlimited in scope while avoiding the pitfalls of a generic broadness. “Para verdad y justicia con memoria.” For truth and justice with memory. The conceptions of truth and justice need to be both personal and collective, because these entail remembering on both levels. Truth implies memory, as does justice. All three involve power. They are not objectively given factoids. Without memory (an individual’s and a society’s) truth is just a story and justice just a word. Taken together, their demand is a call for action, a call for people to act authentically, to recognize the myriad connections between themselves and others, and to acknowledge that each of us has a role to play in making truth, justice and memory a reality and not just a dream.

Beyond restrictive framing, the real value of the Madres movement lies in their aspiration to restore broken social relationships: between parents and children, between the state and citizen, between neighbours and friends, between siblings and family members, between warring factions of all kinds. It means cooperation and listening, mutual recognition, openness, earning each other’s respect and always maintaining dignity. It is political, but stands outside de facto
politics as a critical voice for positive change. It is here that the biggest divergence can be seen between the two organizations, as the AMPM actively participates in divisive tactics and partisan politics that contribute to the social atomization and polarization that are the antitheses of such a restorative project. Within the LF, autonomy of organization and singularity of voice stand alongside the value placed on integration and collaboration. They are unified while maintaining key interpersonal differences. They do not speak against each other, but are not always in total agreement either. Theirs is not a totalizing understanding, unlike the hegemonic rule of the AMPM dictating what constitutes the “true” voice of the Madres in a much more tyrannical fashion.

6.2 The Legacy of Las Madres: A Symbol

“Las Madres tuvimos, no sea que se llama éxito, pero...somos un ejemplo en el mundo.”
—Mercedes Meroño, Madre de Plaza de Mayo, Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo

“Al nivel mundial, somos ‘las Madres’ y no nos identifican la una o la otra. No. Las Madres, un símbolo.”
—Mirta Baravalle, Madre de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora

“The Mothers proved to be an internationally recognized symbol of the fight against disappearances in Argentina”
(Frey, 2009, p. 59)

“Ellas [las Madres] pueden no estar físicamente pero...han transmitido su ideología, y tiene mucha gente que las respetan a nivel nacional y nivel mundial...Lo que ellas han marcado es un camino que no se va terminar con que sus cuerpos no existan ya. Marcan un camino de ética, una posición de compromiso de las realidades, de las injusticias que no termina con la
desaparición de sus cuerpos.”
—Noëmi (Mimi) Durán, supporter of Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora

“Compañeros, ustedes vieron que se ha levantado una polémica por el pañuelo. Algunos sabrán, otros no, que quieren declararlo símbolo nacional, emblema nacional, porque dicen que desde la época de la Revolución de Mayo no se crearon más símbolos de lucha como la bandera, el escudo, el himno, como la escarapela. Solo se crearon símbolos como el mate, el pato como juego, la flor del ceibo y que, de ahí en más, las únicas que creamos un símbolo de lucha fuimos las Madres...Eso esencialmente el pañuelo es el abrazo del hijo, el pañuelo es lucha, es calor, es el primero que nos dio fuerza para juntarnos para ir a una marcha. En fin, para nosotros tiene una concepción absolutamente diferente a la que le dan las demás organizaciones, por eso el pañuelo es de las Madres. En el mundo entero cantidad de mujeres nos han pedido usarlo...El pañuelo ha recorrido el mundo de la misma forma que nosotros lo sentimos: un símbolo, un emblema, un amor inmenso... Así que hoy, por eso, quería hablar del tema del pañuelo, porque el pañuelo también va a pelear contra los buitres, el pañuelo también va a pelear contra los asesinos, el pañuelo también va a pelear para que basta de armar comisarías para matar a los pibes...Entonces, el pañuelo sirve para todo, el pañuelo es la lucha y el reclamo por la justicia, el pañuelo es, cuando llega a un lugar, el respeto de la gente cuando llegamos las Madres a un lugar...En fin, el pañuelo siempre sirve para un motivo importante de lucha que tenga que ver con el conjunto. El pañuelo no es una cosa individual, el pañuelo no es una cosa que se regala, que se tira, que se pinta con pintura en el pañuelo, no: el pañuelo se borda, el pañuelo se cuida, se limpia y se lo lleva siempre, siempre, en la cartera, es como llevar al hijo junto a uno, nunca

97 “They [the Madres] may not be here physically but...they have transmitted their ideology, and they have many people that respect them on national and international levels...What they have left is a path that is not going to end when their bodies no longer exist. They left a path of ethics, a position of commitment to realities, to the injustices that does not just end with the disappearance of their bodies.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
lo dejamos, así que estamos orgullosas de que el pañuelo, ojala salga, de que sea símbolo.”

—Hebe de Bonafini, Speech in the Plaza de Mayo, July 10th 2014

“Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora da a conocer su posición respecto al hecho de enterarse, por las noticias actuales, y sin haber sido consultadas, sobre la presentación de un proyecto para ser declarado “Emblema o Símbolo Nacional” nuestro Pañuelo. El movimiento de Madres, nacido del dolor, es un movimiento de resistencia activa. Nuestra ronda en la Plaza de Mayo, con el pañuelo, simboliza nuestro compromiso incalculable [sic] con la Memoria, la Verdad y la Justicia. El pañuelo surgió cuando salimos a buscar a los Hijos e Hijas. Fue y es, en nuestra lucha, un lazo de unión con ellos y ellas y nos ha dado la fuerza para seguir adelante desde el principio. No lo sentimos emblema nacional sino signo de amor con Nuestros Hijos e Hijas, por lo tanto nos negamos a que el pañuelo sea declarado como emblema o símbolo nacional.”

—Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora, July 7th 2014

Not to trivialize this research and the significance of a more nuanced understanding of the

98 “Comrades, you have seen the controversy over the headscarf. Some may know, others may not, that they want to declare it a national symbol, a national emblem, because they say that since the time of the Revolution of May there have not been new symbols of struggle like the flag, the crest, the anthem, the patriotic badge. They have only created symbols like mate, the duck game, the ceibo flower, and more like these. The only ones who have made a symbol of struggle is us, the Madres…In essence, the headscarf is the embrace of the child, the headscarf is struggle, it’s affection, it is the first thing that gave us the strength to join together to go to a march. In sum, for us it has a totally different conception from that which the other organizations give to it. For this reason the headscarf is [ours]. In the whole world a large number of women have asked us to use it…The headscarf has gone around the world in the same way that we feel about it: a symbol, an emblems, an immense love…For this reason, today, I wanted to speak on subject of the headscarf, because the headscarf will also fight against the vultures, will also fight until there are no longer arming police stations to kill young people…And so, the headscarf serves for everything, it is the struggle and the demand for justice, it is the respect of the people when we the Mothers arrive at a place…In sum, the headscarf always serves as an important motivator in struggles that have to do with the group. The headscarf is not an individual thing, it is not a thing can be given, that can be thrown. A headscarf should not be painted with any paint, no. The headscarf needs to shine, to be cared for, to be clean and to be carried always, always in one’s handbag. It is like bringing your child along with you, we never leave it. For this, we are proud, and hopefully it will happen, that it becomes a symbol.” (translation K. Laird Barry).

99 “The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Founding Line would like to have known their position with respect to the fact of discovering, in the news recently, and without having been consulted, about the presentation of a project to have our headscarf declared a “National Emblem or Symbol.” The movement of the Madres, born out of pain, is a movement of active resistance. Our march in the Plaza de Mayo, together with the headscarf, symbolize our incaulcable commitment to Memory, Truth and Justice. The headscarf emerged when we went out in search of the Sons and Daughters. It was, and is, in our struggle, a link tying us to them and it has given us the strength to carry on from the beginning. We do not feel it to be a national emblem but rather a sign of love between Our Sons and Daughter, therefore, we reject that the headscarf should be declared a national emblem or symbol.” (translation K. Laird Barry).
complexities of this movement, however; one important point ought to be made: these complexities are both extremely important and completely besides the point. Heuristically, the comprehension gained by analyzing the Madres in this way is invaluable. However, these complexities are overshadowed in the grand scheme of things by the symbolic power of the Madres. The Madres as a movement is recognized all over the world as a unified symbol of resistance to violence and oppression. No doubt theoretically the insights contained in this thesis will have helped to create the space for a more complete understanding of what this movement is trying to do, and how. The importance of this should not be downplayed. Nevertheless, to the average person the Madres are simply the Madres. Although we now know that the reality is not at all so simple (evidenced by the quotes above, which display the contention between the LF and AMPM regarding the use of the pañuelo as a national symbol) the fact that they have managed to establish themselves in this way is itself a great feat worthy of acknowledgment.

When asked about the continuation and legacy of this movement, those I interviewed all spoke of the Madres as an internationally recognized symbol. They offer a positive model, albeit one that has been harnessed for different purposes (sometimes counter to the ones they stand for), of the strength and courage of women, and of people. Symbols, like frames, are a simplified version of a given person, place or event, meant to capture its essence. As such, symbols, like frames, are extremely salient and pervasive. They withstand the test of time well. For this reason, the symbol of the Madres will persevere long after they themselves are gone. What remains to be seen is how this symbol will be used, for what ends, and by whom.

Contrary to what one may think, especially after the efforts here to avoid reductionism, this should not be decried as yet another detrimental simplification as it is indeed part of their
plan. This is one way that their goals are coming to fruition: the desire to help the next
generations by promoting social equality and change through Memoria, Verdad y Justicia. It is
these efforts that are keeping their children, “alive” today, and forever. Their own efforts and
those of their children are immortalized through the symbol of the Madres. This work is “mucho
más noble y profundo” than anything they have done up to this point (M. Aufiero, personal
communication, February 10, 2014), because it is for the benefit of the past, the present and the
future.

What this thesis emphasizes, more than anything, is that despite years of research on the
Madres the case is not yet closed. The jury is still deliberating, both metaphorically and actually,
with the continuation of trials against perpetrators of abuse during the dictatorship in Argentina,
keeping the debate going strong. There remain things to be discovered, to be known. In order to
clarify these we need to be open to new and latent—potentially transgressive—interpretations of
the “givens.” Only in this way will it be possible to shed light on those aspects of social
movements such as the Madres that have the greatest transformative potential.

6.3 New Ways Forward: Areas for Future Research

Argentina, and the Madres movement, represent a “twilight zone” the likes of which I
could never have imagined, but one that beckons to those searching for a challenge—calling for
fresh eyes to look at a sordid situation and come up with if not a resolution then merely a way
forward. The cycle of polemics, of reductive thinking, of in-fighting and blaming each other can
be broken if we heed the Madres’ calls for “Memoria, Verdad y Justicia.” Interrogating the
normative assumptions within the dominant discursive frames represents a first step in this
process by revealing tough unanswered questions and hidden meanings at the heart of the
Madres’ activism. Other areas where fruitful work is being done in this regard include recent
work by Ros (2012) and Crenzel (2011). These scholars take new perspectives on collective
memory and truth telling within the post-dictatorship generation in Argentina, also shedding light
on hegemonic meanings that have dominated the arena to date. Their pioneering work deserves
more attention because of the space it creates for alternative interpretations and their concerted
efforts at giving voice to “others,” whose voices have been marginalized or completely silenced.

Some further areas where research is warranted into the Madres movement include
investigating direct links with international movements that have modeled themselves after the
Madres. There are several such “copy cat” groups around the world but comprehensive empirical
work has yet to be done comparing them. This would help to further improve the understanding
of the power of the Madres as a symbol and give a more thorough idea of their success as a
social movement and as a positive force for change. Also needed is an investigation into the role
of the “behind the scenes” supporters of the Madres. There are many people who have lent
support of different kinds to the Madres over the years. This includes the role of men (fathers,
husbands, grandfathers, brothers, uncles, and friends) who helped the Madres in the early days of
their protests and continue to help them in their day to day activities. Their contribution is
something that is rarely spoken about for fear that it will overshadow the mothers themselves.
However, these people’s contributions to the creation and sustainment of the movement should
be acknowledged.
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