
Cura, Yago
GSLIS 790: Smith
Queens College/C.U.N.Y.
November 4th, 2008
On a topical level, *Nunca Más* (1986/1984), *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (2008), and *Dictators of Latin America* (1972) involve the quixotic legacy of Latin American Fascism, and its psychological toll on Latin Americans. The three texts serve as responses to Latin American Fascism, a rather taboo subject in the civilized world. Most conversations about Fascism, really, are taboo in polite society; and yet, dictators frequently make the evening news, appalling us with their litany of crimes against humanity, lechery, and personal excesses. These texts also deal with the state as a terrorist entity, and delineate the levels the state will go to repress individual rights in service of preserving the order and integrity of a society. These texts illustrate what happens when military officers become demagogues, and train their clutches on the innocent and destitute. Last, all three texts are sensible documents that “narrate” a specific story. These texts exist to remind readers that sometimes the greatest source of terror can come from forces within a country.

*Nunca Más* (1986/1984) is the official document produced by the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP), or The Argentine Commission on Disappeared Persons. The book documents what transpired in Argentina as a result of the National Process of Reorganization, 1976-1982. According to James Polk, writing in *The Nation*, *Nunca Más* “records in exhaustive detail an entire nation’s descent into hell, with a restrained, matter of fact sincerity that is chilling” (1987, par. 5). While it is a work of non-fiction and a government publication, it is by no means a pleasurable, leisurely read (not that gov’t docs. usually are!). *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (2008), a work of fiction by Roberto Bolaño, is about as fantastical as one can get; all of the literary subjects in his fictional genealogy get concise, biographical entries that the reader
eventually realizes are skewed and subjective. By reading his work, Bolaño prompts readers to question the complicity and integrity of editors, compilers, and people of letters. *Dictators of Latin America* (1972), a young adult's non-fiction book written by Patricia Baum, provides essential background knowledge into the historical, social, and political reasons dictators have found such success in terrorizing Latin America. However, the book was published 4 years before the National Process of Reorganization was put into place by the Argentine government, so its value should be limited to reference material for the over-arching subject of Latin American Fascism. Nonetheless, Baum provides essential biographies of six of Latin America's best known dictators (including Peron and Eva) and her first chapter, "The Birth of the Strongman" is adept at explaining why Latin Americans have struggled so intensely with democracy.

During the National Process of Reorganization, 1976-1982, Argentina was transformed into a lawless, nightmare republic by a motley crew of sadistic generals and officers whom had carte blanche to commit acts of “murder, rape, torture, extortion, looting and other serious crimes” (1986/1984, x). While it is difficult to tabulate the total number of citizens disappeared by the Argentine military government, the Argentine Commission on Disappeared Persons believes,

> There are some 600 instances of abductions recorded in the Commission’s files which are said to have taken place prior to the 24 March coup. After that the number of people who were illegally deprived of their liberty throughout Argentina rises to tens of thousands. Eight thousand, nine hundred and sixty of them have not reappeared to this day. (1986/1984, x)

Sadly, many of the key agents in this sordid theater were never brought to justice in Argentine civilian courts, or suffered adequate incarceration as a result of their involvement in the gruesome, systematic Process of Reorganization.
However, following Argentina’s return to democracy in 1983, Argentine citizens elected Raul Alfonsín, a charismatic member of the Liberal elite, and nominee of the “Radical Civic Union party” for his stance on human rights and promise to “investigate the disappearances and to bring responsible officers to trial for their crimes” (1986/1984, xvi). Alfonsín created the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP) or The Argentine Commission on Disappeared Persons; furthermore, he placed Ernesto Sábato at the head of the Commission and the difficult, arduous task that lay before them, “The Sábato Commission was charged with the former: it was not a judicial body, and its report, Nunca Más, made no judgements of individual responsibility” (1986/1984, xvii). Even though the “Sábato Commission” was not empowered to assign judgment or culpability, the objective of investigating claims and producing a report of their findings was approached with the utmost dedication and accuracy. And even though their powers of punishing the guilty parties were non-existent, the “Sábato Commissions” represented Argentina’s first concerted effort to publicly address the mayhem, sadism, and chaos that plagued it during the Process of Reorganization.

It is no coincidence that Ernesto Sábato was chosen to head the CONADEP. As one of the members of “the literary circle Grupo Sur…he encountered Jorge Luis Borges and others” (“Ernesto Sábato,” par. 6) and authored three, unmistakably Argentine novels: El tunnel (1948), Sobre heroes y tumbas (1961), and Abaddón, el Exterminador (1974) (“Ernesto Sábato,” par. 1). More importantly, Sábato showed himself in possession of a firm backbone; for example, “In 1955 he became editor of Mundo Argentino, a Buenos Aires newspaper, but was forced to resign because of his criticism of
the Pedro Aramburu regime and his opposition to press censorship;” the author was also “imprisoned briefly” (“Ernesto Sábato,” par. 9). Likewise, “In 1958 he accepted the post of Director of Cultural Relations in the Ministry of Foreign Relations and Culture, but resigned the post the following year because of his dissatisfaction with the Frondizi regime” (“Ernesto Sábato,” par. 9). Sábato was chosen to head the CONADEP because of his literary character, but also because he was a man of science who could be impartial and effectively collect and codify the data collected. In fact, “In 1937 he was awarded a doctorate in physics from the Instituto de Física in La Plata;” the following year he “traveled to France on scholarship…to study atomic radiation at the Curie Laboratory in Paris,” followed by work at the “Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1939” (“Ernesto Sábato,” par. 4). All in all, Sábato was chosen because of his integrity and experience as a scientist and his literary affinities as an artist and Argentine.

What makes Nunca Más (1986/1984) so difficult to read is that the claimants are entirely allowed to speak for themselves. That is, they are introduced or contextualized by a couple of sentences that work in service of the narration; however, the authors of Nunca Más (1986/1984) use large tracts of legal depositions from claimants to prove their main contention: namely, that the actions of Argentine military during the Process of Reorganization were intentionally systematic: “from 1976 to 1979…more than twelve thousand citizens were ‘sucked’ off the streets, tortured for months, and then killed” (1986/1984, xi). In other words, the military agents and personnel that carried out the atrocities committed during the Process of Reorganization did so out of a sense of duty and because they felt the line of command would ultimately protect them from prosecution.
While *Nunca Más* (1986/1984) might be too grisly for a high school audience, it might be appropriate in an Advanced Placement English class in which there is a discussion about primary and secondary sources. For example, *Nunca Más* (1986/1984) is definitely a secondary source because it distills or interprets the first-hand accounts of the thousands of Argentine and foreign citizens abducted, tortured, and murdered by the Argentine government. However, the commission members narrate their findings in an organized and systematic manner. While the depositions recount extremely graphic and gruesome accounts of abduction, rape, and torture, the tone of the book is logical and matter of fact.

On the other hand, *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (2008) by Roberto Bolaño contains a fictional genealogy of fascist novelists, poets, and people of letters in the countries (Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, Chile, etc.) of Latin America. It purports to be a secondary source, a genealogy compiled by a keen, literary editor, but reveals insights that only an omniscient narrator could possess. For example, the entry for “Edelmira Thompson de Mendiluce,” a minor Argentine woman of letters, says that she was born “Buenos Aires, 1894” and died in “Buenos Aires, 1993” (2008, pg. 3). This leads the reader to believe that the narrator is going to summarize the life and times of “Edelmira,” in an objective manner; however, the entry also contains signal phrases like “According to people who knew her at the time…” (2008, pg. 3) and “According to her enemies” (2008, pg. 10) that alert readers to the possibility that gossip, hearsay, and conjecture might be as prevalent as the empirical components of her literary biography.

There are peculiar tidbits about their births and deaths that no one could possibly know, except possibly an omniscient narrator. Therefore, Bolaño’s *Nazi*
Literature…(2008) purports to index an intricate genealogy of fascist Latin American writers; but, it is riddled with primary-source insights so readers have no choice but to indict the narrator, knowing full well that there is no way they would have access to this intimate knowledge unless they personally knew the subjects. There is no way the narrator cum compiler could have access to the anecdotes and tableaus in Nazi Literature…(2008), unless, of course, she were an intimate or confidant of the subjects. Maybe the theme of Nazi Literature…(2008) is that the atrocities committed in Latin America by military governments not only shared the ethos of European fascists, like Nazis, but shared in the same societal paradox that gave birth to them. Namely, that society as a whole had failed to keep Fascism, or the exaltation of state and race over concerns of the individual, in check by allowing dictators and despots to rise to national prominence. Dictators like Mussolini, and his Latin American incarnation Perón, could not have risen to such prominence without the approval of various sector of society.

In fact, the translator of Nunca Más (1986), Ronald Dworkin, writes that complicity was absolutely necessary for the military’s coups in Argentina to be successful. While the National Process of Reorganization (1976-1982) was carried out by armed, military agents of the Argentine military, it required the complicity of the Argentine people. Just two years after Perón’s death in 1974, the “familiar tanks surrounded the Casa Rosada” (1986, xii) and looking to ouster Isabelita (Perón’s third wife and Vice-President of Argentina) on “March 24, 1976 the military took control yet again” (1986, xii). While a large sector of Argentines protested,

The junta adopted a Statue for the Process of National Reorganization that gave it ultimate power to govern; it replaced the Supreme Court and many other judges with its own appointees, and took command of the
universities. The country did not protest, and the middle class, tired of inflation, appalled by the chaos of Isabelita’s brief administration, and frightened by terrorism, welcomed what it saw as a return to sanity (1986, pg. xiii).

Bolaño’s fictional genealogy, *Nazi Literature…*(2008) may itself be an indictment of the complicity that fascist systems require of democratic societies. Or, Bolaño might be making a statement on the ready existence of fascist sectors within our society, namely the military. Or as Dworkin writes, “A substantial section of the military were fascists. They thought of themselves, not as servants of constitutional government, but as the true ruling caste of the nation, guardians of its values and way of life” (1986, xiii)

Bolaño’s fictional work is not intended for a high school audience. Again, it might prove appropriate in an Advanced Placement English class, but much of the subject matter has to do with the tumultuous and sordid lives of the minor literary characters Bolaño invents. For example, in the entry for “Willy Schürholz,” Bolaño writes that with respect to Willy, “There has been talk of pagan orgies, sex slaves and secret executions. Eye-witnesses of dubious reliability have sworn that in the main courtyard, instead of the Chilean colors, a red flag is flown, with a white circle in which a black swastika is inscribed” (2008, pg. 93). The themes of his work are intended for mature audiences, but a mature high school class might have much to learn from some of the research themes that are raised by Bolaño’s fictional work. For example, like *Nunca Más* (1986/1984), *Nazi Literature…*(2008) is a secondary source, but so much of the power and force that comes through is a result of the successful integration of primary sources. This distinction could lead to some lively rapport in high school classes because as a whole, high school
students love to argue. In a collegiate environment, teachers might want to pair this books with a history text that contextualizes Latin American Fascism.

Patricia Baum's book, *Dictators of Latin America* (1972), is written for high school students with minimal Latin American History content skills. However, it might be appropriate for middle graders in an advanced Geography or Global Studies class. The manner in which she puts forth ideas in *Dictators...*(1972) leads one to believe that Baum’s audience for this book is people with minimal insight or background knowledge into the political history of Latin America, but that have a working knowledge of Nationalism. For example, in Chapter 1, "The Birth of the Strongman," Baum delineates the differences between democracy in North America and Latin America.

The epigraph for the chapter is a quote from Simón Bolívar, one of the great liberators of Latin America of the 19th Century. In the quote Bolivar says, "There is no good faith in America. Treaties are scraps of paper, constitutions are printed matter, elections battles, freedom anarchy, and life a misery...American cannot be ruled". Not only are Bolivar’s declamations controversial, they are deeply troubling because what they imply is that “democratic government was to prove itself unworkable in Latin America" (1972, pg. 8) But, Baum does do an efficient job of supplying her reasons.

The first obstacle to Latin American democracy mimicking North American democracy is the fact that the colonizers that came to North America came to "make a new life and find religious freedom. To Latin America flocked the conquistadors--penniless noblemen, soldiers of fortune, debtors, desperados, even thieves and murderers--all hoping to find wealth" (1972, pg. 9). In addition, the Indians that North Americans encountered were nomads, whereas the Indians that colonizers in Latin America
encountered were "much larger and were sedentary. Some had built well organized
to the existing Indian civilizations and began exploiting the Indians" (1972, pg. 9).

The second obstacle to Latin America democracy mimicking North American
democracy is the fact that the colonizing land owners in Latin America exercised feudal
control over the people that worked for them; these land owners created little fishbowls
or petri dishes of existence that contained all the conditions necessary for society: "Each
had its elegant manor surrounded by barns, stables, and shops, and often a church and a
schoolhouse" (1972, pg. 10). This only made these landowners seem like demi-gods and
the peasants that tilled the land for them expendable: "Between the rich elite and the poor
masses there developed an insurmountable gap" (1972, pg. 10).

The third obstacle to rule was the fact that the North American colonists erected
their legislative buildings as replicas of what was in existence in Europe. But, in Latin
America no such thing happened because "All the real governing power in these Latin
colonies remained firmly in the hands of a few officials appointed by the mother country"
(1972, pg. 11). Whether this was done intentionally or not is not as important as the
lasting effects that it had on the populace. All aspects of civil life were in the hands of
these land owners and they exerted so much power that they "precluded the development
of significant local government" (1972, pg. 11). Likewise, many of the haciendas that
were controlled by these land owners were cut off from other settlements and major cities
by "impassible jungles, high mountains, and scorched deserts" (1972, pg. 11). Therefore,
the people in these settlements usually placed all their trust in the hands of a few
strongmen, or caudillos; they did this at the expense of placing their trust in a strong, central government which was the case in the U.S.

Even though democracy in Latin America has been continuously disrupted, the United States can not claim that it has not played a part in supporting and to some extent sponsoring the state-sponsored terror. Indeed, “During the Lyndon Johnson administration, Washington began to realize it was futile to try to force democratic governments on Latin America...The United States supported virtually all pro-United States regimes, regardless of whether they were democratic or dictatorial” (1972, pg. 183). But, Baum makes no claim about how far our government has gone to support the discord and chaos in Latin America. For example, according to the School of the Americas Watch, the School of the Americas, a U.S. Army training facility at Fort Bening, GA has been used to train, indoctrinate, and provide support for many of the dictators of Latin America

In 1996 the Pentagon was forced to release training manuals used at the school that advocated torture, extortion and execution. Among the SOA's nearly 60,000 graduates are notorious dictators Manuel Noriega and Omar Torrijos of Panama, Leopoldo Galtieri and Roberto Viola of Argentina, Juan Velasco Alvarado of Peru, Guillermo Rodriguez of Ecuador, and Hugo Banzer Suarez of Bolivia. Lower-level SOA graduates have participated in human rights abuses that include the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the El Mozote Massacre of 900 civilians. (“School of the Americas Watch,” par. 3)

If does not make sense for the U.S. to advocate democracy for U.S. citizens and stand by as democracy is razed in Latin America. Americans must understand that for democracy to work on both continents, the leaders of both continents must act in unison and with benevolent resolve to rid countries of state terrorism. Then and only then will
"Americans" be able to say that the specter of Fascism is no longer viable, visible, or a possible alternative to democracy.
References


