
Consent of the Damned, David Sheinin’s most recent book, argues that the means by which ‘ordinary’ Argentines came to understand human rights was a far more complex process than has previously been explained. Recognizing that much of the analysis of this period has been somewhat one-sided, he asks instead, how did everyday, middle-class Argentines understand and help shape a culture of human rights. To do so, he breaks with what he describes as the typical binary of democracy versus dictatorship to examine the emergence of human rights discourses during and in the aftermath of the last period of military rule, from 1976 to 1983. Although the title suggests ‘consent,’ the book is far more critical of this interpretation of middle-class sympathies with the military regime’s project. Sheinin examines a wide base of sources, ranging from popular culture to defense ministry archives, to uncover the collective imagining and fantasy shared by the state and its subjects on the path to human rights hegemony.

Undertaking an ambitious and ultimately quite fruitful reconstruction of middle-class media reception, Sheinin examines the means by which complacency and support for the regime was conditioned by various propagandist campaigns. Using commercial advertisement, television shows, popular newscasts, social and entertainment magazines, sporting events, and romantic-comedy films, he uncovers a courtship between the military’s casting of modern morality and the ‘average’ Argentine’s political, social and economic aspirations. Unveiling these tensions in high visibility spectacle, such as the 1977 Buenos Aires Grand Prix, the work colorfully illustrates the battle of conflicting ideals under military rule. As in Sheinin’s earlier work, close attention to cultural and political actors is coupled with attention to the grander narratives of the Cold War and diplomatic relations. In this book, however, Sheinin moves beyond his earlier studies to investigate mass media publications and mass events frequently sidelined by cultural critics, despite their tremendous market share, and in doing so, breaks new ground in the history of mass culture in Argentina.

Never far from the author’s attention is the role of fantasy, rumor, and even mythmaking in shaping responses to the regime and to competing human rights
agendas. Sheinin offers two valuable forays into the fantastical in considering how the military sculpted a reputation for itself as promoter of indigenous rights and as defender of the nation against the menace of a Jewish conspiracy. In each of these cases, Sheinin skillfully demonstrates the manner in which the regime was able to cast itself as the promoter of human rights to a broad domestic public, if not successfully abroad. This approach to understanding popular culture through its collective psyche inhabits an important place in theoretical literature of resistance and moral economy, though it has rarely been explored due to the limitations of archives and the tenuousness of its claims. In this sense, Sheinin’s work pioneers new territory, taking seriously the untrue and its implications for popular political consciousness. Remarkably, most of the sources Sheinin uses to substantiate these ideas come directly from state archives and popular news media.

In moving his analysis forward to the last years of military rule and the post-1983 civilian government of Alfonsín, Sheinin’s arguments move into more familiar territory. Here, he describes the alarmingly smooth transition from the military’s approach to human rights in domestic and foreign policy to that of the renewed democracy. Here, Sheinin brings home one of his central arguments, that of challenging binary perspectives on the change of regime. Following Diana Taylor’s interpretation of the transition period as highly performative and absent authentic political change, Sheinin draws on extensive archival material and a handful of key interviews to critique the legislative and juridical responses to the military’s human rights abuses. A highlight of this chapter in the work is the revelation that bureaucrats under Alfonsín tasked with human rights accounting, eventually and almost by hazard, revised policies and laws regarding Argentina’s indigenous peoples. In the following chapter, a comparison of Canadian and Cuban foreign policy toward Argentina on the human rights front provides conceptually interesting counterpoints to more frequent discussion of initiatives of the U.S. Department of State and international organizations. These clues to the wider reception of the transitioning Argentine state help to reveal the uniqueness of local human rights discourse.

What is most challenging about the book is its tremendous scope: written by a methodologically dynamic scholar, it is a virtuoso performance that dances between topics rarely treated in the same work. Those familiar with the author’s previous work will find themselves able to trace the various threads to their point of origin; however, those not among the converted may scramble to play catch up. Unlike works that are narrowly focused, Sheinin’s writing is a feast of ideas. Central among these ideas is the question that haunts many scholars of human rights abuses, that of popular support, which Sheinin neither tries to dismiss entirely nor engages uncritically. He argues that middle-class Argentines had a
complicated relationship with the regime, haunted by falsehoods and second-order complicities, but were not ultimately consenting. Sheinin’s work ends in a bar fight, both literally and figuratively, that goes a long way toward explaining how this relationship further evolved alongside the neo-liberal policies that vigorously continued well beyond Alfonsín’s transition government. *Consent of the Damned* is exploratory, adventurous, fast-paced and eminently readable. While the work demands a considerable amount of familiarity with the existing literature on the subject, it rewards the astute reader with fresh insights and daring approaches to questions that have been long overlooked. Sheinin’s provocations will certainly challenge the field to reconsider long-held assumptions about this period and to revisit incomplete answers. While such a nuanced approach may rouse some scholarly consternation, certainly, the field will no longer be a windowless room.

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After a three-year study, the Brazilian Truth Commission which investigated the systematic murder, torture and other abuses carried out during the country’s military dictatorship, submitted its report in December 2014. The commission confirmed that 191 people were killed and 243 “disappeared” under military rule, which lasted from 1964 to 1985. More than 200 have never been found. The 2,000-page report named 377 officials who were blamed for grave human rights violations and recommended a revision of the problematic 1979 Amnesty Law so that perpetrators could be prosecuted.

In this brief and readable book, Jerry Dávila offers undergraduate students the necessary keys for better understanding the traumatic experiences of the Southern Cone during the years of military rule. By adopting a comparative perspective, Dávila allows students to consider the idiosyncrasies of each military dictatorship and at the same time the similarities among these authoritarian regimes. After all, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile went through similar processes during the same time period, and in all three ABC cases the military regime held power for a longer time than ever before, was more brutal and violent than any of its predecessors, and adopted a somewhat similar economic policy.

I have used this book in one of my courses at Tel Aviv University and it proved very successful in provoking fascinating discussions as to the nature