

MAKING CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL ON A HUMAN RIGHTS SEMINAR: CHILE AND ARGENTINA

Prof. Marcus Breen

When the French cultural critic and theorist Pierre Bourdieu published his incendiary paper “The Forms of Capital,” as a book chapter in 1986, he introduced two central concepts to the academic lexicon: cultural capital and social capital. Both terms were derived then defined by Bourdieu through the lens of accumulation. This process, as Karl Marx noted, draws on the ability of the owners of production to maximize economic resources for themselves, through the control and accumulation of profit. Bourdieu’s insight was to suggest that in the cultural and social world, other types of accumulation take place, giving those people who own and control cultural and social life significant types of power.

This kind of power manifests itself as knowledge. Once it is captured in the human consciousness it builds up, much like the dollars in a bank savings account, to be used in the production of further advances in understanding the nature and operation of human behavior. In effect, the capital accumulation of knowledge is the result of seeing and experiencing culture within the social world, then putting it in the mind-bank.



Memorial to Victor Jara, Cementario General de Santiago

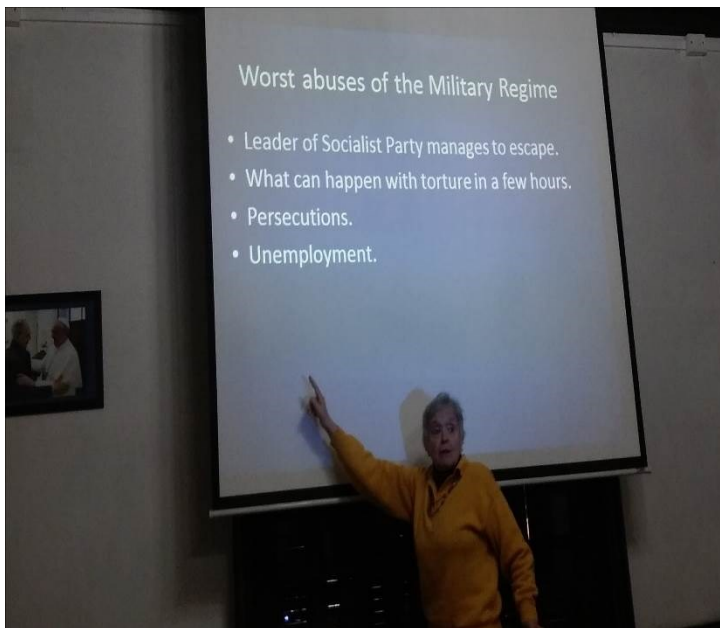
Bourdieu’s formulation of cultural and social development – which deserves a much more detailed reading than offered by this short commentary – is helpful in explaining the way these two capital formations came into play during the Boston College Seminar on Human Rights tour to Santiago and Buenos Aires in May 2017. The 10 participants came away with an increase in cultural capital after being somewhat shaken by their exposure to human rights abuses in both cities. Happily, we returned to the US after ten days with social capital in the bank, having made new friends, albeit friendships rendered against the background of the sights, sounds and images of inhumanity in two military dictatorships.

For all of us, our capital accumulation was built on interactions with each other, tour guides, colleagues and the public in the context of a program of learning that was directed at an investigation of human rights abuses Chile and Argentina. It was a seminar that embodied a process of knowledge acquisition in the Intercultural contexts of two different countries, reinforced by experiential learning.

Almost nothing could prepare a participant for the impact following meetings with those who suffered torture or the sense of despair on learning about the people who are still missing. From the very first day, seeing the memorial site for Victor Jara, the popular singer killed three days after the Chilean coup on 11 September 1973, the pressure of firsthand observation gave both cultural and social capital an unexpected intensity. When the military junta's vicious take-over actions were set against the democratically elected

President Salvadore Allende's short time in office, discussion of Victor Jara and the many thousands of dead and missing until 1990 felt like a hot blade to the heart of any conceits about the seminar as a kind of [academic tourism](#). (I have Jara's most popular songs on vinyl in my record collection, a reminder of my life in popular music, as much as a statement of my politics.)

The first day also included among other things, a visit to a vast wall of names of the missing and the dead in the Cementario General de Santiago (Santiago Cemetery). "The wounds of war" is just a cliché in such a moment: language could not nor cannot do justice to my emotions, a combinate mess of rage, sadness, defeat, fear and somewhere maybe, hope.



Prof. Maria Isabel Donoso

I was however, reinvesting cultural capital, after having closely followed the coup against Allende in Australia, my home country in the 1970s and 1980s. In those years, I met and worked with refugees from the State Terror campaign who relocated to Australia. Seeing and hearing this culture in the social world of our tour leader Oscar Nuñez who led us Boston College travelers to the wall on bicycles, was like an immersion in an ongoing process of grief. Earlier, Oscar told us about aspects of the coup in front of the Palacio de la Moneda alongside a beautiful statue of Salvadore Allende. Consequently, my cultural capital took an uncertain turn as my knowledge of the United States involvement in the coup was clarified then consolidated. What happened to Human Rights in this country? What did my country do here?



Cementerio General de Santiago

On the second day at the Jesuit Alberto Hurtado University, Maria Isabel Donoso's presentation "The Role of the Catholic Church in Human Rights during Dictatorship," explained the way The Vicariate of Solidarity, of which she was a member, protected the civil, political, individual and economic rights of Chileans opposed to the military coup. Safe houses offered escape and support for political activists, peasants and the poor, enacting, what Maria explained as a continuation of Liberation Theology in the context of Vatican 2, informed by the parable of The Good Samaritan.

The Brazilian educator Paolo Freire was invoked by Maria in the phrase "freedom in revolution," as in finding emancipation from poverty and oppression through education and knowledge. Freire was an educator whose work informed education for peasants and the underclasses across South America and whose work continues to inform pedagogy to-day.

Her presentation came at me like a punch in the solar plexus, prompting me to think again of the Chilean refugees in Australia who became life-long friends of my wife and I. Maria reminded us that Liberation Theology had never been disavowed by The Vatican and that it still has a role in Latin America, informing a commitment to the poor and powerless.

At the end of her presentation, I could not avoid thanking her for her work, for the risks she and many others in the church took in The Vicariate of Solidarity to protect democrats engaged in the progressive project in Chile. Furthermore, I happily told her that in 2015 Boston College had awarded the Peruvian philosopher and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the founders of Liberation Theology, the President's Media for Excellence, placed around his neck by BC President, Father Leahy at a ceremony in the crowded Heights Room in Corcoran Commons.

Moving on to the Museo de la Memoria y Derechos Humanos in Santiago was like moving into the slow grinding wheel of unhappy history. In its displays, this remarkable building embodied the excesses of



Statue of Salvador Allende, Santiago



Museo de la Memoria y Derechos Humanos, Santiago

the fascist imagination in action. Newspaper cuttings, redacted CIA documents, television footage of the bombing of Palacio de la Moneda

and on and on, floor after floor, until we ended in front of a vast wall of portraits of the missing, the dead, the hope of Chile. On returning to my hotel room I started writing the poem “What can be said?”

Pablo Neruda’s poems were more real to me here than before. I read a couple to the group from *Canto General* on our first two days, but I could not do justice to my emotions, nor to my uncertainty about what the other members of the contingent were experiencing as their cultural capital accumulated. Cultural capital is after all, a personal form of accumulation, processed through the pre-history formed by one’s experience and values. Were they as distressed as me as the examples of US-inspired hatred for human progress was revealed to them? We were going to unfamiliar places, yet as we talked and shared our shock at seeing the memorializations of the horrors of military dictatorships, our cultural capital was growing together.

And yet our knowledge was formed in the negative, as the German dialectician Theodore Adorno might have noted, through our exposure to barbarity and the possibilities for its opposite.

And how was our social capital going? The answer was that the enormity of the Human Rights images confronting us created an affect that invisibly bound us in new ways. The stories of horror confronting us were directing us into different and divergent orientations toward each other.

That is a type of capital best reflected

in the transition from collegiality to friendship formed through our social interactions.

Hearing torture victim Pedro Hatta at the Villa Grimaldi detention center site on the outskirts of Santiago confirmed our sociality through a kind of group shock treatment. His descriptions of torture and the disappeared went beyond authenticity, deep into truth. His considered recollections of his treatment and those of his *campaneros* included detailed descriptions of brutality like electric shock, hanging by the intestines from trees, rape, beatings. Here again Adorno came to mind, with his “Dialectic of Enlightenment” playing out in my mind, as Pedro showed us the garden with dozens of rose bushes and plaques with women’s names painted on them. It was here that women prisoners were brought to be raped, in a perversion of beauty that scarred my cultural capital.



Site of Former Villa Grimaldi Detention Center, Santiago



Memorial site, former ESMA detention center, Buenos Aires

In Buenos Aires, together with positive and wonderful events like horse riding at an *estancia* (ranch) in San Antonio de Areco, we visited Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos (ESMA), a detention and torture site. From here the missing were numbered in their thousands: tortured, forced to work on translations of foreign media reports for the military junta, or to make newspapers, or be selected for “transfer” which was a euphemism for disappeared.

Prisoners marked for transfer were taken after being sedated to nearby airports where they were up-lifted mostly in helicopters out over the Atlantic Ocean or the River Plate, and thrown to their deaths. Never to be seen again. This disappearance process became known only after a group of prisoners were mistakenly taken to be “transferred,” and returned to ESMA cognizant of what this word really meant. Hundreds of people are still unaccounted for. Court cases and inquiries continue.

In the basement, a couple of dozen photographs of prisoners stare out at a large empty room. These photos only exist because a prisoner found rolls of film and smuggled them out of ESMA in one of the visits the military made with some prisoners to their homes to create the fantasy that everything was OK. Here one image captured me: a woman staring out, forlorn, hopeless and beautiful (see arrow). Unnamed, lost forever, with her fellow prisoners, although the finder of the photos survived and leads tours at the torture site today (see star). Whoever she was, she became the prompt for my poem “For the missing.”

The next day at lunch I asked Catalina Smulovitz, Vice Rector at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, if there were many academics among the disappeared. “Oh Yes,” she replied. Then she told us about how she was held for three days as a teenager. Her memory within the struggle for human rights continues.



Mural, Buenos Aires

In the final analysis, how much cultural and social capital did this seminar represent for the participants? No one knows because unlike gold or even money, there is no way to count the capital we gained. Nevertheless, we know that in the interactions with each other, with locals

and in our own inner dialogues, there was, to quote Marvin Gaye, “something goin’ on.”

Better still, on returning home, London School of Economics researcher Robin Mansell posted her latest article, “Inequality and Digitally Mediated Communications: Divides, Contradictions and Consequences,” which had no direct relevance to the Boston College Seminar. But her conclusion was that to ensure information equality, everyone in society should be included in the democratic process, to guarantee information electronically for all. In making her case, she quoted Paolo Freire, who said that, “dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it.” Or as Pierre Bourdieu might have added in reflecting on the Boston College Seminar: dialogue is where human beings discover cultural and social capital, making everyone richer.

Marcus Breen teaches in the Communication Department at Boston College, where he is Director of the Media Lab and the Movement and Media Research Action Project (MRAP).

For the missing

By Marcus Breen

Her face and nameless.

Among the many,
who knows this counting
when the infinite barbarity strikes,
numbers hardly matter –
(forget positivism)
against the idea of
this junta juggernaut
“sweeping up,”
the communists
the socialists
the Marxists
the unionists
the academics
the comrades.

Every flame, as she was once,
falling in love –
imagine the soft touch,
her skin in an ecstasy,
delighted to see you
because loving is revolutionary.

Acts of hope
now in this picture extinguished,
to be left
by the bastard sons of the plague
as they retreated, never lost fervor
for killing state terror

(Oh yes, the state and its god!)

Bags over heads on the streets,
deployable fear mongers
packing hate heat,
joining the cause against the people,
then the unoriginal
“the horror”
pain for games for lives
then
and then
she went,
away, on the display remaining
nameless, beautiful, older, humble,
then
“transfer”
and airports,
planes, helicopters,
ocean
“death flights,”
absent grammar here,
purely pathology,
she went,
fell, how many feet?
Forever
“The missing”
She’s gone.
Staying on that reminder board.

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Found photos
of one who loved,
like the many lovers
instantiated in history.

Did she, could she have a baby?
Was the child taken?
Can I ask these beckoning questions?
The poem ends – a sense of this
dreadful exhaustion:
touring ESMA in Buenos Aires.

Abide with me comrade.
Stay, stay, please,
stay. The calm in knowing
you were here
once
for others
for us,
the struggle in certitude,
continuance.

May 24, 2017

What can be said?

By Marcus Breen

Learning from repetition
death - “the dictatorship”
in Santiago.
This was described as a “junket”
by a colleague at Boston College.
But
who can call this repetition
anything except
persistent reminders of
history gone awry
bent out of shape by
(you cannot say that)
yet they said it,
the young people said it,
youth, energy,
still seeking truth as tour guides,
they said it,
the three letters of our country,
(refusal of Allende’s democracy)
they spoke clearly
the young people,
out of justice for love
of country,
the three letters:
C.I.A.

Write there, here I wrote
what cannot easily be said,

rhymes with dread
or more precisely “the dead”
in this country,
from my adopted homeland
across the cone of South America
“Operation Condor” – birds of prey –
soaring, all these years later and
never the Dodo
of extinction
inside the Museum, Memory,
Human Rights, here on Avenue Metucana.

(They came to my country too.
In 1975, a bloodless coup,
removed the Australian Labor Party
Gough Whitlam for Prime Minister:
“It’s Time!” the party’s 1972 election slogan,
reconfigured temporality by American cousins,
conservatives licked their lips
with help from those three letters.)

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Thump the table,
rescue-hide the best of the future.

Maria Isabel Denoso with the
Vicariate of Solidarity
during the dictatorship,
she hits the table,
her aged fist makes a point
again;
a hero here in front
of the long line of herstory,
the struggle shared and
spoken.

She recalls the parable of
“The Good Samaritan” as
the light pours out of her.

Everything is said:

the young
the old.

Meanwhile:

I remain speechless,
cursing, silent,
contemptuous of
the three letters of that
unmentionable,
now,
in a free Chile.

Marcus Breen

18-19 May