

A Conversation with Dr. Debbie Sharnak



*In the following interview, I speak with Dr. Debbie Sharnak about her new book, *Of Light and Struggle*, which covers the Uruguayan human rights struggles of the 1970s and beyond, examining how transitional justice has shaped political conversations in that country. We also discuss her own work in human rights efforts and her interests in transitional justice.*

Joseph Johnson: I thought that your work is a little different from what we typically see at CENFAD, especially with its focus on non-state actors and non-government organizations. I thought this would be a refreshing topic for our newsletter.

Debbie Sharnak: Well, thank you for thinking of me.

JJ: Thank you for writing such an awesome book. I just finished it the other day. I wanted to say also, I know I told you in-person that your presentation was fantastic. But, reading the book solidified that it was a great presentation. It felt like I was reading a 250 page supplementary text.

DS: That's very weird to hear you say. I know that the book is out in the world. So it's very weird still for someone to say "I actually read it." As you know, and as you will continue to know, a project like this lives in your head like its on a screen, but only three people ever see it for a long period of time.

JJ: There were time where I realized that you really covered all the content in your topic.

DS: Great. That means that it was perfect.

JJ: So, my first question is, how did you come to focus on Uruguay and its struggles with transitional justice [TJ]?

DS: Absolutely. I had a career working in human rights non-profits after my undergraduate experience, and I was lucky enough to find myself working at the International Center for Transitional Justice, or ICTJ, as one of my first full-time jobs after college. At the time it was a very new, exciting field to be in and is in many ways still. This particular moment was even more exciting because the organization was expanding. There was a lot of

interest in the potential for transitional justice and the broader field of human rights, as well as peace building. I felt like I got to be on the front lines of that.

DS: The organization as a whole dealt with cases all over the world. So thinking really, really globally. And they had offices in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. But there was a particular Latin American history to ICTJ. Some of the founders were from South Africa, and therefore heavily influenced by the truth commission experience there. By the time I arrived at ICTJ it was run by Juan Mendez, who was a survivor of political imprisonment and torture in Argentina. And of course, the case of Argentina, in respect to its own truth commission was very foundational to the field. I was in the research unit, run by Pablo de Grace, a Colombian philosopher. But he also had a lot of practical experience in the field. So, having been a Latin American studies minor at my undergrad institution, and influences at ICTJ, kept a particular focus on Latin America.

So, while I was there, there was a referendum that took place in Uruguay in 2009. Just to give a tiny bit of background on this, the military dictatorship officially lasted from 1973 to 1985. In December 1986, there was an amnesty law that passed. This basically gave anybody that was in the police or military immunity for any crimes that had been committed during the dictatorship. In many ways this was not uncommon during transitions. With these kind of blanket amnesty

laws, particularly with the Southern Cone transitions back to democratic rule in the late Cold War, some held out better than others.

There was a procedure in place that basically said you could challenge any law as long as 25% of the population signed a petition asking for it, which is a pretty incredible, direct democratic procedure. It was used in 1989 to attempt to overturn the amnesty law, but it failed. And again, when I was at ICTJ in 2009 a second attempt failed. This is actually interesting to think about, right? In 1989, when I felt that in some way it might have made a bit more sense, but in 2009 there were 2 fundamental components that really shifted people's hopes about it being able to succeed and overturn the amnesty law. One of them being that Uruguay was under a liberal government which was a leftist coalition for the first time. The second kind of support is international. Thinking about the changing norms that Kathryn Sikkink write about in the Justice Cascade, and the rise of holding people accountable for massive crimes that had been committed. So there's real hope that it would succeed. Yet, in 2009, it also failed. I was at ICTJ when it happened and there was a lot of shock. Soon thereafter, I went to graduate school. But it stuck in my mind, this question about why do societies, especially in a context of a seemingly progressive society in the context of human rights accountability, when it goes before

democratic vote, people don't vote for that.

I was going to graduate school for history to study the history of human rights at an international level. When I was finally looking for a dissertation topic and trying to figure out where I wanted to focus on for that project, this came back to me. But when you're a historian, you don't look at 2009 to figure out the answer to what was happening in 2009. You have to go back to look at what happened during the 1989 referendum, and if you look at the '89 referendum, you have to look more broadly at how discourses in human rights and accountability shifted. It's a long explanation, but it was really my work in the field that I wanted to come back to, to answer some of those questions about human rights and accountability.

JJ: I can only imagine that being on the ground and working with a human rights organization is a very different mode of interacting with human rights than academia. Is this something you're still involved with in any way?

DS: Yeah, yeah. First of all, I was in a very specific unit at ICTJ, which probably informed my opinion because I wasn't looking at graduate school after undergrad. I was

definitely not convince that I was going to get a PhD. I was looking at a master's in public policy because I

was in a really specific unit where, because it was in many ways an activist organization, we were supposed to work with governments and non-profit actors. It was organized both regionally and thematically for the bulk of the organization. So there were not all these regional

offices. But there was a unit on all these different TJ mechanisms. There was one on trials, one on reparations, and one on moralization. There was one on the truth commissions. So it was organized thematically in the New York office where I worked.

And then there was the research unit, which was not only supposed to produce research to inform our units within ICTJ, but they also did a lot of UN policy because the UN for the first time was taking up transitional justice and writing handbooks for it. So, I was able to see how informed scholarship could have an impact on policy on the ground. That was a really exciting place to be. I looked at what the lawyers at the organization were doing, and the PhDs, and I realized I wanted to do that. So that's how I decided to go that route.

But it stuck in my mind, this question about why do societies, especially in a context of a seemingly progressive society in the context of human rights accountability, when it goes before democratic vote, people don't vote for that.

Obviously, I'm less involved. Throughout my PhD, I did quite a bit of different consultancy work. The pulls of a full-time tenure track job, which I'm wildly fortunate to have, also means I have a lot less time for outside opportunities. But the main non-profit work I do now is as an analyst for Freedom House's "Freedom in the World Report." I've been doing that since 2014, so I'm getting close to my tenth year on that. I also do some volunteer work for Amnesty International as co-chair for their South America group.

JJ: I can imagine that a tenure track job pulls most of your attention. But, continuing on the topic of transitional justice, what do you think are the lessons we can learn from these pursuits in an era of increasing authoritarianism in global politics?

DS: There are lots of lessons. I'll just put two on the table for now. One is what I end my book with, which I think has a lot of resonance. There's increasingly scholarship about this in other contexts and disciplines, but it's how we think about the ordering of transitional justice as a field, and the fundamental phrase 'transitional.' The term came out of the transition in South America and Eastern Europe, and fundamentally, South Africa as well. It was all about the immediate aftermath of either state violence or genocide. And what the case of Uruguay tells us is that how we implement various transitional justice mechanisms. Mechanisms need to be thought of in a broader sense, and not just an immediate aftermath because when

societies are most capable of addressing specific human rights concerns doesn't need to be confined to that immediate aftermath.

What I'm trying to bring to the table is that there needs to actually be more studies of this from a historical vantage point because I think that there is increased need. There's a ton of scholarship about this from sociology and political science, but the field of history has not really gone very deep looking at histories of transitional justice. And so more histories that look at this trend, specifically transitional justice, or individual mechanisms is a great topic for many future dissertations and books. We get a lot from looking at the coding and ordering of transitional mechanisms through amazing political scientists like Tricia Olson and Kathryn Sikkink. They're working on this. But, we haven't seen it in depth from a historian's perspective because it is so recent. I think there is a lot to be gained from the field of history addressing transitional justice broadly. I'm going to stop there because I can go on for a long time about lessons, but looking at the ordering of and implementation of accountability mechanisms, and adding the historian's perspective a very important.

JJ: Transitional justice is something I have been interested in with my own historical research, and I think your usage of Uruguay is very useful for demonstrating the breadth of TJ. It makes me think of the capacious definitions of human rights rhetoric

in Uruguay and how you show that it is constantly expanding and contracting according to different political realities. It just shows that these concepts, TJ and human rights, need to be interpreted more broadly.

DS: That's absolutely rights. How we look at this as a political tool, versus just a technical one, is important. Thinking about the very end of *The Justice Cascade* after I left the ICTJ. One of the major terms of the field, from a practitioner perspective was how "transitional justice" was starting to take on the work of all of these other fields, like the failures of peace building and the failures of development because of international involvement. If peace building isn't working, how do we use transitional justice to build peace? There was a big criticism of the field becoming too capacious and trying to do too much. I think there was a turn back to say that we need to look at it more narrowly in context, which is true, right? We don't want TJ to be a substitute for failed development policies, because they are not using accountability mechanisms.

But I think you're right in terms of us thinking broadly about the term. Also, being able to realize when it's important to think narrowly, and to also think about the very real political context in which accountability mechanisms are used and how they interact with basic

needs and human security. It's not that they don't mean anything, and not that they shouldn't be done eventually. But how we think about the political context in which they are going to be utilized to prevent backlash.

If peace building isn't working, how do we use transitional justice to build peace?

That's one of the things that we've seen is a huge backlash to accountability activities. In some ways, the last 10 years tell us that because there's been the greatest advances in accountability over the

last 10 years. You'll also see the rise right now of these far right regimes that are trying to roll back those advances.

JJ: I really want to know what it was like working with such a broad international archival base. You use interviews, state archives, NGO records, and religious organizations to name a few. It seems that your collection is almost as chaotic as their attempt to form a political coalition in Uruguay.

DS: Yes. Well, it definitely proves challenging when trying to put it into a narrative. I was trying to look at some of the debates and arguments, and also points of convergence about human rights. I felt like it was really important to have a broad base of archival support. I had done a bit of training both in Latin American history as well as international history, so I was able to look at a lot of different

NGOs across the United States, even in Wisconsin, New York, and DC. And Duke University has a great human rights collection. This all provided a robust archive for starting in the US part of the research.

And then, of course, in Latin America I also wanted to make sure that I was looking at a lot of different organizations there. As you might imagine, it's harder to find stuff during the dictatorship, because people didn't keep very good records out of fear. They could be a cause to be thrown in jail. But, especially in the post-dictatorship period, there were really good records to follow.

I tell this story sometimes when people ask about one of the organizations where I spent a lot of time looking at their records. They have somewhat of an archive. But for the most part, they said "Here's our filing cabinet. Feel free to go through it." It was just kind of a mess. Labeling and figuring out where it went was a really formative experience in terms of being able to see all of the diverse efforts, particularly around the referendum.

The best stuff I found was actually at the Rockefeller Archives Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York. Because that is where the foundation archives are because that's where the Ford Foundation archives are. I was able to cross-reference those materials with some of the lawyers at the time, which made a great base.

I'm hoping what I did is, without diving into any one group in too much detail, is provide a flavor for the type of debates and different types of advocacy, and how they transformed over time; but also, how they fundamentally interacted with one another because so many of these groups were working with each other and diverging at key points.

JJ: I thought it came across effectively. Trying to capture the dynamics of this muddled human rights effort that was operating on so many levels. One of the things I found interesting throughout your book is the focus on the absence of women in your source material. I found it interesting that you constantly called our attention back to that reality in your book.

DS: Thank you. That's one of my big points that I try to talk about with my students, and that I feel is really important in the scholarship. Silences and what the silences tell us as well. I'm not the first historian, as Trouillot is the most well-known, but that resonated with me in terms of trying to think about silence. Not only the absence of voices, which is very prominent among women, but also other actors from underrepresented groups at key moments during the dictatorship. Also thinking about when people are or are not invoking human rights as part of their strategic objective.

JJ: Thank you! I found it refreshing to acknowledge the silences in that way. Now to shift gears a bit. I heard

that you have a bit of a history and connection with CENFAD. Could you explain how you ended up involved with CENFAD?

DS: Absolutely! I am a long admirer of CENFAD. I first heard about it because when I was a senior in undergrad. One of my advisors at Vassar College was Katherine Hite, who worked on issues of memory and human rights. The other was Bob Brigham, who is a scholar of Vietnamese history and US Vietnamese relations. He was a big admirer of CENFAD, and very close with Richard Immerman. So in my senior year he encouraged me to apply for the Sherman prize, which I was really grateful to do. That was my first communication with Richard.

At the time, I was still at the ICTJ, but I was becoming curious about doing a PhD. Richard was really gracious and invited me down to the conference that Will Hitchcock and Petra Goedde were organizing, which resulted in an edited edition called *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*. They workshopped the papers with scholars like Mark Bradley, Kelly Shannon, and Sarah Snyder was there, if I'm not mistaken. There were a lot that were amazing. I was working in the field, but now working with people that were looking at the origins of transnational human rights movements. It was incredibly impactful. They invited me down to participate as a commentator that spring at the Barnes Conference, too.

So, when I moved back to South Jersey in 2019, Alan and I connected and he gave a book talk at Rowan University. He talked about *The Ghosts of Sheridan Circle* at the Holly Bush Institute. I've stayed in touch with Richard Immerman, and I've been on the CENFAD mailing list for fifteen years now!

When I started teaching a senior seminar and having students write really great papers, I have always encouraged my students to send them in for the Sherman Prize. I don't know how many have and did not get it, but one of the stars in our program applied and was awarded the Sherman Prize last year! Kaitlyn Ley, on her paper about Reagan's policies in Guatemala. I don't know how many second generation awardees there are in the history of the Sherman prize, but it was very special and our department was extremely proud of her.

JJ: That's fantastic. I'm so glad that you've been able to have such a full circle, and longstanding relationship with CENFAD. We greatly appreciated you spending time with us, and several people complimented your presentation afterwards. My colleagues who do not study Latin America came up to me afterwards saying how they loved the lecture. So thank you continuing to share your academic achievements with us.

DS: I feel very grateful to have had that opportunity. It was a very full circle moment. Since that conference was in 2008, and a few

years after college, to come back and talk my book was a surreal experience, but also very special. And now, being able to connect with graduate students and rope you guys into Rowan stuff is special. We'll make this happen. We'll create a bridge between the two places.

JJ: Thank you so much for doing this interview with me. I really appreciate your time to meet with me so I can share this conversation with our community.