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This paper reflects on the strengths and limitations of framing Operation Condor as a human rights issue. The human rights framework has been central in documenting and exposing the violence carried out across the Southern Cone, but it has also shaped how that violence is understood. Following David Kennedy, this paper looks at what is gained through this framing, what is left out, and what alternative ways of understanding this violence might make more visible.

Framing Operation Condor through human rights shifts where attention goes. It puts the focus on victims and legal accountability, while the larger structure that made the violence possible becomes less visible. In that sense, the framework highlights certain aspects of the violence but pushes others into the background. At the same time, it makes the violence visible beyond national borders. Terms like “enforced disappearance” and “torture” create a shared vocabulary that can travel across institutions—courts, NGOs, and international organizations—and generate attention. In the case of Condor, this vocabulary was crucial. Much of what is now known about the coordinated repression across the Southern Cone comes from human rights reports, truth commissions, and testimonies collected under this framework. Without it, the violence could have remained fragmented, localized, or denied.

Human rights discourse also provides tools for documentation and accountability. It creates categories that allow evidence to be organized and recognized legally. My archive reflects this directly: declassified documents, survivor testimonies, and investigative journalism are often structured around proving violations—who was detained, where, under what conditions, and by whom. This kind of documentation is not neutral; it is shaped by the need to establish responsibility. Human rights law makes it possible to pursue cases in national and international courts even decades later. In that sense, the framework does real work. It transforms scattered experiences of violence into something that can be named, recorded, and prosecuted.

At the same time, this framing has important limitations. One of the main issues, as Kennedy suggests, is that it tends to individualize harm. Human rights discourse often focuses on victims and specific violations—this person disappeared, this person was tortured—without fully capturing the system that produced those outcomes. In Operation Condor, the violence was not a series of isolated abuses. It was a coordinated strategy between states, supported by intelligence sharing, cross-border operations, and Cold War geopolitics. Reducing this to a list of violations risks losing sight of the structure itself. The danger is that the system becomes invisible while the symptoms are carefully documented.

Another limitation is the emphasis on legality. Human rights frameworks depend on defining what counts as a violation under the law. This narrows the analysis to what is provable in legal terms rather than what is politically or historically significant. In the context of Condor, focusing only on whether a specific act qualifies as torture or illegal

detention can obscure broader questions about state power, ideology, and international involvement. The violence was not just unlawful—it was part of a coordinated political project aimed at eliminating opposition. Legal categories do not always capture that scale.

There is also a temporal problem. Human rights discourse often operates after the fact—it documents, archives, and seeks justice once the violence has already occurred. While this is important, it can create the impression that accountability is the main goal, rather than prevention or structural change. In Argentina, much of the recognition and legal action related to Operation Condor came years later—roughly eight years after the regime had already carried out its campaign of disappearances. In this sense, the framework reacts to violence rather than addressing the conditions that made it possible.

Because of these limits, alternative framings can offer a different perspective. One option is to understand Operation Condor as a form of genocide. This is not straightforward, since genocide is often associated with ethnic or national groups, but the concept can be expanded to include the systematic destruction of political groups. In several Condor countries, regimes targeted leftists, union organizers, students, and intellectuals—not randomly, but as part of a broader effort to eliminate a perceived threat. Framing this as genocide shifts the focus from individual violations to collective destruction, raising questions about intent, scale, and long-term impact.

Another approach is to frame Condor as state terror or a transnational system of repression. This emphasizes coordination, infrastructure, and power. Instead of asking whether specific acts violate human rights, this framework looks at how states organize violence across borders, how intelligence networks operate, and how international

alliances—particularly in the context of the Cold War—enable repression. This perspective makes it easier to see Condor not as a series of abuses, but as a structured project involving multiple governments and external support.

David Kennedy's critique helps clarify why these alternative framings matter. One of his central arguments is that human rights discourse can simplify complex political situations by translating them into legal terms. In doing so, it risks flattening the historical and political context. Applied to Operation Condor, this means that a coordinated system of repression can be reduced to a set of recognizable violations—easier to process, but less accurate.

Kennedy also points out that human rights tend to focus on suffering rather than power. The emphasis is on victims—their pain, their stories, their rights—rather than on the structures and actors that produce that suffering. In the case of Condor, this can lead to a narrative centered on victims without fully analyzing the mechanisms of coordination or the geopolitical context that made the operation possible.

Finally, Kennedy argues that human rights can operate within existing systems of power rather than challenging them. By focusing on correcting violations, the framework can give the impression that justice can be achieved without fundamentally changing the structures that enabled the violence. This raises a key question: does prosecuting individual cases address the system that allowed multiple states to collaborate in repression, or does it leave that system intact?

In the end, framing Operation Condor as a human rights issue is both necessary and insufficient. It has played a crucial role in exposing the violence, documenting its scale,

and enabling forms of accountability. At the same time, it limits the analysis by focusing on violations, legality, and individual suffering. Alternative frameworks, such as genocide or state terror, make it possible to see the broader structure and intent behind the violence. Following Kennedy, the challenge is not to reject human rights, but to recognize its limits and use it alongside other ways of understanding justice.

Work Cited

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