

# Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity *by Adam Rosenblatt*

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## ***Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity* by Adam Rosenblatt**

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In the scholarly literature on transitional justice, the expressions “unearthing the truth” and “digging up the violent past” commonly refer to a country’s efforts to come to terms with past human rights violations. With some notable exceptions, however, few scholars have really probed the role of exhumations. Additionally, existing analyses have focused on exhumations in individual countries or regions. *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity* by Adam Rosenblatt fills an important gap by offering an account of the global emergence of forensic experts who apply their work to human rights and humanitarian disasters.

The book has two ambitious objectives. The first is to narrate the historical backdrop against which the forensic community of experts emerged and diffused globally. The second is to explore moral and ethical challenges faced by forensic scientists in post-conflict settings. The book is skillfully designed for a broad, interdisciplinary audience, including those interested in transitional justice, human rights, peace-building, international norms/epistemic communities, and critical legal theory. Despite dealing with subtle and challenging concepts, the book is engaging, self-reflective and surprisingly accessible; Rosenblatt’s most significant achievement could, in fact, be the ability to make an academic book on a highly technical subject a page-turner for a broad readership.

In its first part, the book provides a historical account of the emergence of the forensic community in Argentina. In the aftermath of the transition in 1982, the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Disappeared initiated a powerful mobilization to trace the whereabouts of their loved ones. One of the least known incidents of this well-documented mobilization is their initiative to travel abroad and contact geneticists in the United States to assist them in their search for truth. The American Association for the Advancement of Sciences (AAAS) responded by sending a team of experts led by

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Dr. Clyde Snow (the patriarch of forensic sciences). This mission was pivotal; not least among its accomplishments was training a local group of graduate students in the application of forensic tools in the identification of human remains. These students quickly established the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), arguably the most influential forensic group in the world. Over the course of the next 30 years, EAAF participated in truth commissions, testified in trials of human rights abusers, and helped thousands of families from Guatemala to Cyprus identify the remains of their loved ones and reach closure. In essence, the book sheds light on two influential, yet neglected, stories of human rights: first, how human suffering mobilized scientists to invent novel scientific applications to address pressing humanitarian problems and second, how these novel forensic tools radically changed the way societies deal with the violent past. Simply stated, forensic exhumations have marked a paradigm shift in transitional justice.

This alone might have been enough, but Rosenblatt is more ambitious. In the second part of the book, he raises and addresses a number of ethical questions at the intersection of law, science, and politics. This section is highly recommended reading for scholars interested in ethical, moral, and legal challenges in peace and conflict research, as it draws on rich empirical material from field-research around the world, as well as interviews with different forensic teams. To cite one example, Rosenblatt notes the interesting tension between the moral universalism of science—often seen as objective and cold – and the application of forensic tools at the local level, where scientists talk directly to families and are thereby seen as humane and subjective. This reflects a broader clash in the identity of the forensic community: the overlapping roles of the scientist and the activist. Rosenblatt explores the gray area between these two identities and sheds critical light on the limits of the objectivity of medico-legal evidence. In contexts of mass violence, facts do not always reveal the truth but lend credence to a particular version of the truth. As he aptly puts it, “forensic evidence...is used to tell a story of a crime, its perpetrators and its victims. There are always choices that can be made” (21). The book highlights other challenging dilemmas, including whether dead bodies have human rights, or how different cultures and religions treat the dead body. These insights often contravene the uniform policy interventions applied by international organizations.

Despite these strengths, I would have preferred to see more emphasis on the impact of external influences on the global diffusion of the community of forensics. The global prominence of forensic tools would not have been possible without a parallel normative shift in international politics, bringing human rights center stage. For example, without the truth commissions, fact finding missions, and international criminal tribunals which emerged over recent decades, it would have been impossible for forensic teams to gain global currency. Yet this is a minor quibble; overall, Rosenblatt offers an authoritative account of one of the most important developments in transitional justice: the emergence and diffusion of the forensic community of experts. The innovative scope of the book, the unique questions it raises and comprehensively addresses, and its accessibility make it a must-read for anyone interested in human rights, transitional justice, and post-conflict studies more broadly.