

Memories of state violence: the past in the present¹

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On March 24, 2006, people in the city of Buenos Aires, like the majority of the Argentinean population, assembled in the streets. Congress declared the day an official holiday. The President delivered a speech in the *Colegio Militar de la Nación* (the military academy for training officers) and unveiled a plaque that read: “Never again coups and state terrorism.” In the first row was an assortment of people, ranging from the major leaders of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* to schoolchildren, sitting side-by-side with high-ranking military officers. Later, 100,000 people—carrying various banners, flags and photographs—marched in remembrance of those people who had disappeared. The occasion was the 30th anniversary of the military coup of 1976.

The weeks before that date were saturated with information concerning the military coup: exhibitions, lectures and seminars, special issues and supplements of magazines and newspapers, films and television programs, as well as statements by survivors, victims, political leaders and parties, universities, and cultural agents. Public life was consumed by the anniversary and the commemoration. However, it was not entirely a peaceful event; discord and opposition were manifest in a few street incidents, and there was even disagreement about the statement that was to be read at the most important public rally, resulting in an open conflict at the podium.

Why do I bring this anecdotal evidence here? What does it show? It indicates what I want to convey as the basic message of this lecture: that the passage of time does not imply closure or a societal sense of having settled accounts with the past. The passage of time in states and societies with histories of political confrontation and violence, of repression and suffering, does not erase the past—that the old adage that says as time passes, one forgets, is not true—or at least cannot be extrapolated to societal experiences of state repression, when people faced the “limit” of the human condition. What has to be recognized, then, is that looking at a conflictual and painful past, and searching for its meaning, is a never ending undertaking and ultimately the

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history of the conflict translates into present day conflict. Under such conditions, political attempts at coming to terms with that past, or the attempts to reach closure, are bound to fail.

In what follows, I will present an overview of the historical transformations of the struggles around the meaning of a conflictual political past, focusing on the experience of the countries in the Southern Cone of South America –Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, and particularly Argentina. The key question to address refers to the ways in which social and political actors deal with the past and attempt to make sense of it (although often remaining in the realm of the nonsense).

There are multiple levels and layers at which these processes take place: from personal processes of healing and/or the maintenance of open wounds among survivors, through symbolic representations and cultural performances, to institutional practices such as trials, investigative commissions, economic reparations, monuments and territorial markers, or commemorations. In particular, institutional actors have a distinctive task: to find interpretations of the past that will allow them to conceive and present their countries as “normal” ones.

When the past is one of political conflict and involves harsh repression, attempts multiply to find closure, to “solve” and suture the past wounds and ruptures, to “come to terms” with the past. Such attempts will always be contested. And thus, historical processes of construction of memories are never ending, always open and conflictual. At any moment, different actors express their will to present ONE narrative of the past, trying to make their own interpretation the hegemonic, legitimate, “official” or normal one, with the hope that it will become part of “collective memory”, accepted by all. Yet struggles develop among conflicting and competing interpretations and memories of the past, and about the location of these understandings and memories in the democratization process (Jelin 2003).

One further introductory note: We know that the past gains its meaning in its link to the present through the act of remembering and forgetting. This implies that the meaning of the past is located in the present, a present where the space of past experiences, and the yet-to-be or not yet experienced future, converges. The *Futures Past* (Koselleck 1985), the *Present Pasts* (Huysen, 2003), the *Ever Present Past* (Connan y Rousso, 1994) –as titles of important books on the subject—refer to a present that simultaneously has to recapture and distance itself from the past; and yet the meaning of that past is still not clear. New historical processes and political scenarios cannot produce a renewal of interpretive frames for the understanding of past experiences and the construction of future expectations. Changing times and circumstances, a multiplicity of different meanings, and the constant transformation of actors and historical processes are some of the dimensions that mark the complexity in this field and obstruct ones understanding of this problem.

How to “normalize” the past? The German dilemmas²

The German case offers the vocabulary and the initial conceptualization to think about these themes. In relation to the Shoah and its aftermath in German contemporary history, Jeffrey Olick asks the question, “What does it mean to “normalize” the past? (Olick 2003). He then looks at the ways the German state answered this question in the sixty years since the end of World War II.

Before Olick asked the question of what it means to *normalize* the past, Theodor Adorno asked the question “What does it mean to come to terms with the past?” in 1959 (Adorno 1986), and Germans are still asking the same question. Can the past be “normalized”?³ At the time of his lecture, Adorno was concerned with the fact that rather than confront the past, Germany seemed to adopt a defensive stand, trying to leave its past behind; he interpreted the German reluctance to confront the Nazi past as a signal of the persistence of Fascist trends within German democracy.

His lecture took place at a specific historical moment: the turning point between the “economic miracle” of the fifties and the social protests of the sixties, which were to witness the voice of a new generation coming to age, one that started questioning the politics and structures of the post-war period vis-à-vis the Nazi past. In contrast to the previous consensus that led to silence as a means to “dominate” or control the past, the sixties were a time when there was a push to remember and work through the Nazi past. Rather than seeing a historical break between the war period and the post-war, many started to point towards the continuities between the Third Reich and the Federal Republic. This would change later on, in the late seventies and eighties, when the neoconservative wave rejected the constant remembering and the “self-flagellation” for the Nazi past.

One way of reading the history of Germany’s policies toward its past is to see it as successive attempts to **normalize** the past (and also the present), trying to present Germany as a “normal” country (Olick 2003). Very succinctly, from the post-war period and up to the early sixties, the German government tried to show the world that Germany was a **reliable** nation: through institutional reforms, a clear alignment with the West, and large payments to Israel in the form of reparations. These policies were attempts to show the world that Germany was a reliable country.

² This section of the paper is actually a summary of Olick 2003.

³ Look at all that can be done with the past: it can be confronted, silenced, forgotten or repeated, accepted, worked through or reenacted, ritualized, mastered, invented, and so on.

In the nineteen sixties, the attempt at normalization took the form of presenting Germany as a **moral** nation. The country was confronting the past in order to draw lessons and stand up to its responsibilities. Then, in the 1970s, with the oil crises and the neoconservative ascent, German leaders presented a new image of a **normal** nation, one with a history that was similar to other Western nations, with their “ups” and “downs”. In this context, “the effort of normalization aims at the past (the Nazi past), at the history of the memory of the past, as well as at the present” (Olick 2003: 264).

All along the nineteen eighties, there were actually two strategies of normalization: first, the strategy of **relativization**, claiming that the German history had its horrors, but so did the pasts of other countries. The emphasis was in the fact that German history spanned a much longer period than the Nazi experience, and Germany was “Normal” in a statistical sense. The other strategy was that of **regularization or ritualization**, based on a State and society-run commemorative apparatus. The recognition of responsibilities for past atrocities became a regular feature of political rituals: public ceremonies of guilt, a myriad of commemorations, visits to concentration camps, memorials and other memory sites. The past became a part of “normal” rituals, though segregated from day-to-day activities. A real “domestication” of the past has taken place.

After 1989, the past was very much in the present, but the new political reality implied new layers of meanings. Jewish stores were destroyed and vandalized on November 9, 1938 (this is known as “Kristallnacht”), and that same day in 1989 is when the Berlin Wall fell, marking the reunification of East and West Germany. Because these dates coincided, there was concern that the public manifestations of joy for this event (the wall falling) were going to blur the somber commemoration of the 1938 event. In order to solve this dilemma, a decision was reached by the government to officially deem October 3, 1990, as the date of the German official reunification, and to continue the state remembrance of “Kristallnacht” on November 9th.⁴

Like other Eastern European regimes, Germany was facing the complex issue of how to act vis-à-vis the Communist past. Given the German model to confront and domesticate the past, the new “communist” past displaced the old “Nazi” past, and the latter looked like ancient history for many. This displacement was a potent agent of normalization: Germany was now one country among the many that had to deal with the communist past, and thus relativization was working flawlessly. Historical issues and the dilemmas involved in the “coming to terms” with the past referred now to Communism (Chancellor Helmut Kohl even referred to Communist “concentration camps”, posing an implicit equivalence).

⁴ An analogous coincidence of dates, this time in the international scenario, is September 11: the date of the military coup in Chile in 1973, with new layers of meanings implied in the “9/11”.

Strategies of relativization (such as obscuring the differences among types of victims or incorporating the Nazi period in a long-term view of German history) were used by neoconservatives both before and after 1989. In the changing context, however, ritualization turned out to be a better strategy: to accept blame and responsibility in ritual occasions, performed at specific times and places, segregated from the rest of “normal” life. It seems that the German state learned that the quest for normalization can be better served through rituals than through silence or defiance. The “correct” practices in isolated occasions and specific places could help to develop a “domesticated” memory, with a soothing and reassuring effect.

What we learn from this stylized story is that the debate continues and is reopened time and again; that there are no final points or total silences, no closures. There are instead, constant reinterpretations and continuous processes of searching for meaning, both of the past and of the interpretations of the “old” past that were made in the more recent past.

The history of memories in the Southern Cone

It is not possible to directly apply this type of analysis to the history of the countries in the Southern Cone, centering attention on the strategies that States have developed during the last three decades. States have not been and are not the hegemonic actors in the story; non-state actors have to be brought into the scene. Furthermore, the period covered is one of political transition, which means that the State itself is under scrutiny, becoming at the same time the subject and the object of the struggles for memory.

Some context

On September 11, 1973, the military took over the government in Chile. President Allende resisted, then, as airplanes were bombing the Presidential Palace, he died inside La Moneda. Seventeen years of military dictatorship followed, until a negotiated transition led to elections and the installment of President Aylwin in 1990.

In Uruguay, the violent political confrontations of the early seventies led to the suspension of civil liberties and constitutional guarantees in 1973, with a dictatorial state that lasted until 1985.

In Argentina, on March 24, 1976, in the midst of high levels of violent political confrontation, a military coup displaced President Isabel Peron and installed a military government that lasted until December 1983.

Brazil started its long dictatorial experiences earlier. Brazil had a military coup in 1964, which hardened in 1968, and experienced a slow, almost unending transition that led to the election of the first civilian president in 1985, twenty-one years later –and the first direct election in 1989.

These are neighboring countries with distinct and specific histories, different geographies and different social and political structures. Yet, their histories are interrelated. First, there is a long history of highly porous borders, including continuous movements of political exiles across borders from the early 19th century onwards. Exiles actively participated in the organization of opposition movements for political change in their countries of origin, while keeping close and long-lasting contacts of alliance and solidarity with political forces in their host countries.

Second, during the recent dictatorships, repression was coordinated at the regional level. This was evident in 1991 after documents of the Paraguayan secret police were found; these included documentation of the *Plan Cóndor* and the *Archivos del terror* (Archives of Terror). Also, State Department documents have been declassified leading to a more thorough account of the atrocities committed by the state. These written documents bring to the public sphere the proof that many victims knew because they had experienced international terror “under their own skins”.

Third, as a counterpart, there was a highly interconnected and integrated network of solidarity denouncing human rights violations, which continued its work after transitions. The human rights network is global, but is regionally very *active* (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

In the 1980s and 90s, transitions in the different countries were also interconnected, with constant dialogues and exchanges among political strategists, analysts and activists, and a great deal of learning from experiences “across the border”. The processes were independent of each other; rather, the different countries have been following a shared and interdependent path, while retaining features that make each of them unique.

One shared trait is that in all countries, the recent dictatorial past was not closed at the time of political transition; it kept being a central component of the political scenarios up to the present, and will continue being so in the future. Accounts with the past are not settled, not in institutional nor in symbolic terms.

Thirty or more years have passed since the military coups, and around twenty since the transition to constitutional governments. During these decades, meanings and interpretations of the past have been constructed and renovated. Even the temporal scope and limits of the “past” and that need to be dealt with, are being reinterpreted time and again.

Let me cover some stages and turning points, in a very stylized and synthetic form.

1. The military “saving the nation”

At the time they took power, the military presented themselves in an analogous way in the various countries: their declarations and slogans stressed their “heroic” role, as defenders and the ultimate guarantors of the continuity of the nation. Under the aegis of the National Security Doctrine prevalent during the seventies (at the height of the Cold War), the threat to the nation was defined as “foreign” to the social body, crystallized in “subversion”, the “*anti-patria*”, or the infiltration of international communism. Thus, they were acting to “save” the nation (Stern, 2004).

In fact, at the very moment of their political intervention, the armed forces interpreted the event they had produced in terms of the *long durée*, referring to the foundational moments of the nation: their action was justified in terms of the historical continuity of their role as eternal defenders of the “fatherland”.⁵

The event, then, installed its own determination to be commemorated: the meaning of the action, and the intention to last and pass on the legacy to future generations can be found in the event itself (Nora, 1996; Rousso in Feld, 2000). One could say that in key historical events and conjunctures, time is compressed: the past and the present elaborate the script for future recollection. This is evident even in the very words used to name the events, names that were to become arenas of political struggle: in Argentina, the period inaugurated by the military coup was called “Process of National Reorganization”; it was a “Revolution” in Brazil; in Chile, it was hard to find a name or label, and Chileans are still struggling to name the Pinochet era.⁶ Obviously, the success of the military project was not assured, and the foundational discourse was to be revisited and revised later, depending on the disputes and struggles that evolved over time.⁷

⁵ The patriotic terminology is ambiguous in terms of gender. In Spanish, “patria” –feminine gender while patriarchal in its root. (How does “homeland” fit into this picture?)

⁶ The military used other metaphors in their discourse. Clearly, organic views prevailed: there was an infection, a virus or a foreign growth which had to be extirpated through profound surgery. There was also a familistic discourse, seeing the nation as a big family, and the military the protective father. Mothers were to blame for what was happening to the young who were “Infected”, because the mothers were not taking good care of their children.

⁷ The military visions during dictatorship and the changes of meaning that the military gave to their governments are analyzed in [Hershberg and Agüero, 2005](#).

Controversies about meaning arose at the time of the conflictive event itself. Yet these other meanings and interpretations could not be expressed in the open – repressed, censored and forbidden - they were nurtured in private and in the family, in the “catacombs”, and in open protest acts that were further repressed, silenced or concealed by the regime. Opposition groups and victims interpreted the present not as salvation but as dictatorship and State terrorism.

In the initial stages, and especially among relatives of victims, there was considerable bewilderment and uncertainty, rather than a coherent understanding of what was going on. Channels of communication were closed; secrecy and concealment were the rule. Yet gradually, they started to find paths to take their grievances to the public sphere. Expressive and performative practices had a central role in this period, turning them into signals of collective resistance: no woman can be repressed only for wearing black or for going day after day to the cemetery, or for wearing a white scarf on her head.

Alternative interpretations to that of the military were in the hand of societal actors, gathered in the human rights movement or in local popular protests. They were denouncing repression and emphasizing suffering. The societal installation of a story that was contesting the one of the military was the product of this action, and its scope and scale depended on the vitality, persistence and insistence of these groups.

2. The human rights paradigm in political transition

Political transitions out of dictatorship in the region were not easy, consensual or smooth. The human rights movement was placing demands that were not necessarily a priority for all political actors. In fact, within the groups of political actors committed to the transition, diverging views coexisted: there were those who were ready to postpone these issues, those who were not concerned with the question, those who promoted oblivion, and those who supported the military handling of political conflict, justifying the human rights violations as “exceptions”. In such a setting, those who wanted to face the past and punish the perpetrators were only one voice among many.

Furthermore, the civil-military pacts that led to transition in several countries clearly limited the scope of actions that elected governments could take –particularly, there were many amnesty provisions that capped judicial proceedings for violations committed during dictatorship. Only in Argentina was the self-amnesty decreed by the military repealed by Congress, so that trials could be held (Acuña et al., 1995). In all cases, however, political struggles to settle accounts with the past expressed themselves with multiple demands: the search for “truth”, the quest for justice, the search for some meaning for the painful past. In the realm of subjectivity, in artistic expressions and in different areas of cultural and symbolic life, the voices

that conveyed narratives of victimhood and suffering were complemented by other voices, including those that Stern calls “memory as persecution and awakening” (Stern 2004: 109). Struggles for memories and for making sense of the past turned into a renewed arena of social action in the region.

The ambiguities and ambivalences of transition, and the difficulties in the elaboration of a master narrative about the past can be illustrated by the Argentine experience. The dominant logic stemming from the human rights community - local, regional and international- set the issue in terms of “state terrorism” and “human rights violations” (as opposed to the military view that defined the situation in terms of a “war” with some “excesses”). “Truth and justice” were the banners of the movement. In terms of State policy, the demand for “Truth” led to the establishment of an investigative commission –CONADEP (an early antecedent of what years later would be called “Truth commissions”, such as the Chilean “Truth and Reconciliation Commission”. No official commissions existed in the other countries –only reports prepared by societal organizations in Uruguay and Brazil).

Besides listing denunciations and describing the patterns of repression, the reports attempt to present an interpretation of the political conflict that led to dictatorship. In Chile and Argentina, the basic reference is to the political polarization existing before the military coups. Polarization is related to violent practices, and this violence is seen as the activity of “*unos pocos*”, a few ones, leading to the image that the bulk of society was at crossfire, “*entre dos fuegos*”, the military and the guerrilla. Thus, the ground was ready for the image of the “two demons” that were hitting a harmless society. While in Argentina this implied the call to prosecute the members of the military juntas and the leaders of the guerrilla movements, that were mostly outside the country, in Chile the commission report includes as victims both those disappeared and killed by the military dictatorship and the members of the armed forces and the police that were assassinated by the armed groups.

The Uruguayan and Brazilian reports, done without any State sponsorship, placed more emphasis on the underlying economic and social crisis, as well as on the civil and political conditions leading to the military coups.

The title of three of the reports, **Nunca más**, provides a clue to the cultural climate in which the reports were generated, and to the meanings of these acts of remembrance. That the experience should not be repeated, *nunca más*, began to be identified with the idea of “truth” and with the accumulation of all possible information regarding the atrocities. And in order “not to repeat”, memory had to be kept alive. “Remember, so as not to repeat” began to emerge as a message and as a cultural imperative.

There is something else to be said about this period. How should victims be characterized? The Argentine report only dealt with disappearances; the Chilean with disappearances and assassinations⁸; the Uruguayan and Brazilian also included torture and imprisonment. But, what information about victims is to be gathered? In general, the emphasis is on the mistreatment and abuse suffered at the hands of the State. In the process, victimhood is constructed, and the political commitments and agency on the part of the repressed are silenced.

The report (especially in Argentina) emphasized a humanitarian side, and because of this, it depoliticized the conflict. Yet the ambiguity of the narrative of the past remained: Was it state terrorism and human rights violations? Or, was it a Social and political struggle with winners and losers? Or, a “dirty” war with “excesses”? At that time, the prevalent framework was that of human rights violations and State terrorism, and this was even more salient a year later, at the time of the trial of the nine military men that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1982.

The human rights framework that emerged in this period was new. Before that time, political and social struggles were interpreted in terms of class struggles, national revolutions or political antagonisms. The incorporation of the frame of violations of human rights implied a paradigmatic shift, involving a conception of human beings as bearers of inalienable rights, independent of their will or action (Jelin, 2005). It assumed also that state institutions have the fundamental responsibility for respecting and guaranteeing rights. Yet in a sense, this paradigm involves a depoliticized image of conflict and led, in turn, to the elaboration of memory policies in this case.

Although basic rights principles were inscribed in the liberal constitutions adopted by the Latin American countries in the 19th century, the actual presence of such principles in the lives of people was almost nil, especially for popular classes and subaltern sectors. Now, somebody – initially from outside the region—was defining reality in these terms, and such definitions filtered through deeply into the anti-repressive demands. What is interesting in this case is the fact that it was not the “specialists” in political mediation (political parties) who led this paradigmatic shift, but rather a wide network that included relatives of victims, members of religious communities, activists and international organizations, intellectuals and just a few political leaders –mostly those in exile. Then, stemming from these new meanings that allowed interpreting state violence in human rights terms, the paradigm began to cover other structurally embedded forms of discrimination and violence, such as the rights of indigenous peoples and the subordinate condition of women.

⁸ Only in 2004 did the Chilean government act to establish a new commission to receive denunciations of torture. The Commission received around 37.000 denunciations of detention and torture.

In sum, transitions involved the retreat of the military, and thus their Salvationist discourse lost ground (perhaps with the partial exception of Chile). The military receded into their own institutional spaces, to reaffirm their identities and justifications there. In the public sphere, the interpretation of the past, framed in terms of “human rights violations”, became the dominant one. Within this framework, however, there are different and even conflicting interpretations about the way the political nature of the conflict and polarization before the coups are to be interpreted, ranging from more “humanitarian” or “humanistic” ones, where the central role is that of the “victim” (often with the added qualification of “innocent”) –interpretations that tend to silence the conflict before the military coups -- to images where political identities and conflicts of the past “past” are recognized and in some sense brought to the present.

3. A new generation, new questions

Any observer of the Southern Cone in the early nineties would have interpreted the political scenario as one of “equilibrium”, where the dictatorial past was already surmounted, forgotten or relegated; the wounds healed or healing. The strong push of neoliberalism and the economic opening up of the countries were calling for an image of “normal” countries, based obviously on democratically elected governments and on some degree of certainty and foresight (the “juridical security” that foreign investors were calling for). It seemed that after the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the bipolarity, governments were leaning towards a strong notion of **normality**: normal countries, governments and societies, committed to the tasks of building economic efficiency in a global world.

There was little room for emotional remembrances of the past, which had to be silenced or even better, forgotten. Political actions accompanied such equilibrium: pardons granted by President Menem in Argentina; the defeat of the plebiscite to repeal amnesty laws in Uruguay; a Chilean transition based on a pact with the military, with all the “authoritarian enclaves” and “moorings” that this involved; a modern and forward-looking Brazil –everything augured (promised) a vision of the future in which the past was exactly that: a past that has already passed away; perhaps a painful past, but one that was already surpassed.

Underneath this apparent calm and apathy other things were happening that would transform the political and cultural scenarios in the years to come. In fact, the nineteen nineties were full of events linked to “settling accounts with the past”. Besides the insistent demands of the human rights movement, three developments are significant in that decade. First, the emergence of a new generation and a new demand, coming from the young, especially through the entry into the stage of the organizations of HIJ@S, with their innovations in the issues raised and in the forms of expression of their demands –the “escrachés” and “funas” (Jelin and Sempol, 2006).

Comment [MDB1]: I am not sure what this is. I think it may be an NGO or something because I looked up how “hijos” translates into English and it loosely means “young man”. I am confused by the @ sign and the CAPS without an explanation of the acronym.

Second, new links developed between the human rights organizations and emerging new actors, broadening the field of demands linked to human rights abuses and violations. For instance, issues of sexual orientation were read in terms of human rights, the unemployed and the homeless started to interpret their situation in terms of violations of economic rights. In sum, there was an emergence of a variety of actors in the public sphere asking for justice, for recognition and for state action, challenging the “normalcy” that the governments were attempting to install.

Third, international judicial pressures mounted during these years. The most publicized case is the 1998 detention of Pinochet in London (Roht-Arriaza, 2004). Yet before that, French and Italian courts were investigating the Argentine military concerning the disappearance of citizens since the late 1980’s, and Spain prosecuted actors involved in committing crimes against humanity in Argentina, and then in Chile.⁹

New spaces of public visibility and current recognition of the dictatorial past were being created. In Argentina, a turning point was 1995, when the confessions (but not repentance) of a Navy officer, Cap. Scilingo, came to light. He gave a first-hand account of the “vuelos de la muerte” (death flights) where victims, still alive but anesthetized, were thrown into the River Plate from Navy airplanes (Verbitsky, 1995). In Chile the turning point was 1998, when Pinochet gave up his role as Commander in Chief and claimed a lifetime senatorial seat, and then was detained in London. In Uruguay, social mobilization was reactivated and, in 2000, the Uruguayan president Jorge Batlle gave into international demands linked to the case of the abduction of the granddaughter of a famous Argentine poet who had been taken from her mother at birth and was then raised by a family who did not know her identity, it was not until March 2000 that it was discovered that she was the poet, Juan Gelman’s granddaughter. This marked the first instance of President Batlle recognizing that there had been illegal repression in the country.

During this stage, the State attempted to “encapsulate” the legacies of the dictatorial past, in its quest to present a “normal” country for the neoliberal structural reforms. Facing the demands of social movements, governments responded by attempting to find closure to the past through “reconciliation” (in Chile), “peace” (in Uruguay), or silence (in Brazil). In the Argentine case, given the strength of social demands, State strategies involved individualized responses such as economic reparations to victims and relatives, but limited the acceptance of international

⁹ This European judicial activity had an important impact in the justice system of Argentina and to a lesser extent in Chile. Conversely, one way to stop having justice systems in other countries and international attention focus on repression within each country was to refuse extradition demands on the basis that the accused were being indicted in their own countries.

judicial demands. At the beginning of 1998 President Menem even suggested building a “Monument to reconciliation” –a park that would sit at the site of a former torture chamber; the plan was met with public protest and was criticized by human rights organizations.

And we come now to the present. Now, the continuous and systematic action of the human rights social movement in each country, and the transnational networks between them, has led to a major shift in the very meaning of what “normality” means. My hypothesis here is that the very notion of “normalization” is changing: what is “normal” for a country and a society seems to be to distance itself not from the past but from relativization, oblivion and indifference. It seems to be “normal” to confront the past and to open up the hidden boxes of violence and repression.

In fact, what is clear is that the strategies that governments developed during the nineteen nineties were not successful; they did not bring about closure. Thus, Uruguay called for a “Comisión para la Paz” in 2000, with the aim of finding peace among Uruguayans. Rather than closing the accounts with the past, the report of that Commission (in 2003) called for a judicial treatment of the past, promoting new investigations and the efforts to localize and recognize the buried bodies of victims. The electoral victory of the Frente Amplio in 2004 and the inauguration of President Tabaré Vázquez assured the opening up of new investigations and the important public presence of the theme. Although the intention may be to investigate for a certain time and then promote some closure, the interaction between social forces and the state apparatus (as well as developments abroad, especially in Argentina) indicate that such closure is not to come in the near future.

In Argentina, during the first years of the current century, “truth trials” again placed the country at the forefront of innovations in ways to handle the past. More recently, amnesty legislation that restricted judicial initiatives was repealed by Congress and declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, leading to a proliferation of indictments and trials. Furthermore, since President Kirchner’s inauguration in 2003, the government has focused on dealing with the memory of the militant youth in the 1970’s and of the military repression. Nowhere in the government’s agenda is there room for closure.

In Chile, perhaps the most significant governmental initiative was the establishment of a “Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura”, receiving more than 30,000 denunciations of torture and political imprisonment during the Pinochet era. Reparations are in the making for victims. Within the realm of what current legislation allows, indictments continue, including

demands that involve Pinochet himself.¹⁰ Proposals deriving from this report emphasize individualized reparations to victims, a policy subscribed by President Michelle Bachelet when she was elected. Her victimization during dictatorship was highly publicized during her campaign and in the rituals of her inauguration in March 2006. She talks about “reencounter” rather than “reconciliation”, and shows her will to “suture wounds” among the diverse sectors of Chilean society, on the basis of information and “truth” regarding each case of repression.

Undoubtedly, there are some components of “ritualization” and even of “routinization” in all this process of confronting the past. There are also activities and meanings linked to “truth” and “justice”. There are attempts at domesticating or pasteurizing past struggles and confrontations, proposing “tranquilizing” memory policies. There are initiatives laden with ambiguities and ambivalences. In fact, there is a myriad of concrete ways in which the confrontations and interactions between societal actors and the state is taking place. What is important at this point is not so much to focus attention on the concrete forms that are proposed and carried out, but rather on the **very fact that they are present and on the societal activism around them.** Furthermore, perhaps the recognition of conflicts, the variety of actors with differing orientations and interests, and the plurality of voices in the public sphere, should be taken as signs of a dynamic democratic incorporation of societal views and expression.

Is the problem solved or solvable?

Does all this activation imply that a “solution” is in the making? Is it possible to find a final resolution, one that can put the past in history instead of being part of current life? The answer seems to be negative. Because, in the first place, the “past” is not something fixed and closed. In the initial transition period, the center of public debate was defined as human rights violations during dictatorship, coupled by immediate demands of truth and justice. As time passes, there is a shift in actors and interpretations of the past, and the very definition of “the past” changes. Thus, in contemporary Argentina, social debate and governmental recognition are focused much more on the social mobilization that preceded dictatorship, including a growing debate about the responsibilities of those who engaged in armed struggle.

Secondly, the question remains open because, as Hannah Arendt claims, there are crimes, sufferings and damages that cannot be repaired. Any attempt of resolution is bound to fail.

¹⁰ In the Foreword of the Report, presented in 2004, President Lagos says that “the elaboration of this report is an unprecedented experience, since it re-constructs, 31 years after the events, a complete picture of the tremendous abjection that the country lived through, and attempts to create the conditions for reconstructing our collective memory. It represents an act of dignification of the victims and an attempt to heal the wounds of our national soul”.

Third, a definitive solution is impossible because the temporality of memory is not linear. The past may be resistant to pass, and can come back repeatedly, this could be because the human rights movement does not allow forgetting, or because new generations ask new questions and reinterpret the past, or because there are no satisfactory resolutions of the demands in the present. Perhaps, then, what is “normal” for memory is to be open ended, always subject to debate, with no final line, in a constant process of revision. It is this openness of the labors of memory what turns them into creative and productive processes, what makes memories the focus of dispute and, why not, our object of study.

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