

government and body politic are not only unacceptable as a matter of principle, but would entail harsh, targeted sanctions by the USA. Instead, although President Bush recently signed an Orwellian executive order broadly sanctioning anyone who threatens the 'stability' of the current pro-Western Lebanese government, administration officials regularly meet with Israelis, such as cabinet minister Avigdor Lieberman, who endorse transfer policies that undermine the prospects of a Lebanese consensus and that give fodder to Hizbullah.

Of course, even if the USA and its allies mustered the will and foresight to take these and other conflict mitigation steps, the more powerful dynamics of any Arab–Israeli and/or US–Iranian conflict would probably overwhelm the entire enterprise – just as peace on either of these fronts would also probably overwhelm Nasrallah's public rationale for maintaining Hizbullah's arms. This fact should not, however, freeze domestic efforts to build sensible barriers to violence in the long run, as is the case now. Although the effort to undermine Nasrallah's rationale head-on is certainly a task that faces many hurdles, it has a reasonable chance of succeeding if pursued vigorously and intelligently by some of the very states now directly involved on the front lines of Lebanon's future. If this path is not taken, however, then only Arens's logic of war will be left to guide the impending period, and the costs of that will be terrible for all sides concerned.

Terror, reconciliation, redemption

The politics of memory in Argentina

Guillermina Seri

After its definitive transference to civilian hands, the Argentinian state has decided that ESMA, the infamous Buenos Aires Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada, or Navy School of Mechanics, will from now on serve as a major memorial site. This site is to comprise a Museum of Memory, an archive, and various services and activities devoted to the study of state terror in Argentina. Overlooking Libertador Avenue in Núñez, an elegant *porteño* neighbourhood, and frequently referred to as 'the Argentinian Auschwitz', back in the 1970s the site served as a major clandestine death camp where about 5,000 people were secretly held and only a couple of hundred survived. In the memories of millions of Argentines, ESMA is a synonym of state terror. It evokes individuals kidnapped from their beds at night by paramilitary squads to be brutally beaten up and tortured, kept in captivity in filthy, terrible conditions just to be shot or thrown alive from planes into the sea. It echoes the image of pregnant women forced to give birth clandestinely only for their newborns to be illegally appropriated and the mother murdered. Scenes of family members, including small babies, being tortured in the presence of a prisoner as well as imaginative uses of water, rape, rods, and rats in the production of unspeakable pain and death are among

ESMA's collection of horrors. This is just a tiny snapshot of the history that saturates its walls, which, as someone working there once said, give one 'goosebumps'.

ESMA began to function as a camp right after the coup of 24 March 1976, when a military junta took over. The government of El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional established hundreds of *centros clandestinos de detención* (CCD) or 'clandestine centres of detention'. As part of El Proceso's allegedly anti-communist, Christian and Western crusade, workers, artists, factory councils, union representatives, professionals, university students and professors, activists, religious personnel, secondary school students judged 'subversives' were abducted from their homes, workplaces, schools, universities or the streets by *grupos de tareas* and brought to camps to be tortured before their contingent release or murder. Most camps were improvised in police stations, military buildings or country estates, frequently located in central urban districts by businesses and private homes. Some camps served as transfer centres and others as final destination. Directly under the orders of junta member Admiral Emilio Massera, ESMA appears to have been the death camp with the largest number of detainees, which continued in operation until the very end of the military dictatorship in November 1983. Known perpetrators such as Alfredo Astiz, Jorge 'El Tigre' Acosta, Miguel Cavallo and Adolfo Scilingo were active at ESMA. Through such a loose network of camps, state terror was knitted to urban space and to the souls of Argentines. About 30,000 people were made to 'disappear' and thousands went into exile. Meanwhile, coordinated plans such as Operation Condor extended terror also through Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil, even reaching Ecuador and Peru.

The transformation of ESMA's imposing main edifice, sports grounds, training facilities and other buildings spreading over 17 hectares into an *espacio para la memoria* (Space for Memory and for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights, as the banner hanging on the front of the building says) was the culmination of a long struggle by human rights organizations. The first proposal to build a museum at ESMA was presented in 1990, yet the idea gained momentum only after President Carlos Menem decreed its demolition to build a memorial park devoted to 'national unity and reconciliation' in 1998. The immediate reaction of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo led to legal actions and triggered an international campaign to preserve the building, which eventually turned into the proposal for a museum. The definitive step was taken by President Néstor Kirchner in 2004 on the twenty-eighth anniversary of the military coup, when after apologizing on behalf of the state he announced the creation of a 'museum of memory' at ESMA. A commission with representatives of the federal state, the city of Buenos Aires and human rights organizations was put in charge of the project.

The Argentinian state has defined the purpose for ESMA to teach 'present and future generations the irreparable consequences that are brought by substituting the rule of law with the application of violence by those who exercise state power'. Assigned the task of coordinating the design of the memorial, human rights group Memoria Abierta invited proposals, which Marcelo Brodsky compiled in his book *Memoria en Construcción*. Alternatives ranged from the strict museum-like reconstruction of camp facilities to the inclusion of various cultural and human rights activities not strictly linked to the years of El Proceso. Among the latter, Hebe de Bonafini, on behalf of a group of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, questioned the turning of ESMA into a 'museum of horror' or 'museum of victims' and proposed instead the creation of a 'popular university' and a school of art at the site. In turn, SERPAJ, the Peace and Justice Service led by Nobel Peace laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, stressed the need to place ESMA in the context of hundreds of other concentration camps built throughout Latin America. But it was HIJOS (Hijos por la Identidad, la Justice, contra el Olvido y el Silencio), the organization of the children of the 'disappeared', which advanced the

most radical perspective, arguing for the need to approach the entire network of camps as a whole. Moving the debate beyond ESMA, HIJOS proposed an archaeological reconstruction of all camps to preserve evidence for investigations and prosecutions and demanded a legal framework to transform former camps into *espacios por la memoria*, 'spaces for memory', to be regulated by an autonomous entity. While such sites could include collections and reconstructions, HIJOS envisioned former camps as sites of permanent *escrache* (a form of protest mixing street performance, protest and artwork to expose the identities and domiciles of perpetrators) aimed at those responsible for state terror. Even though major decisions were made regarding ESMA, such as preserving the Officers' Casino with signs describing the function of different areas of the camps as well as putting together a collection on the repressive history of the modern Argentine state, and the memorial museum is now a reality, discussions will continue as the project unfolds. Moreover, controversy about the aesthetics and the politics of memory at ESMA will further influence the discussion regarding the other many former camps.

Argentines remember

Like a palimpsest, Argentinian cities contain traces and sediments of terror that, even decades later, make their way into our lives. Their size, characteristics and location widely vary, and it is not unusual to read in the newspaper a report on the identification of an additional former camp. Hundreds of camps have been located; back in 2001, the official count reached 651. A network of camps between Zárate and Campana in northern Buenos Aires, a state building in the *porteño* neighbourhood of Barracas, and a former camp identified in Esteban Echeverría, Buenos Aires, in July 2007 are among the recent findings. Camps reappear sometimes unexpectedly. In the summer of 2002, two survivors recognized the site of their captivity in Parque del Faro, an amusement park for young children built over a lighthouse in Mar del Plata, noticing that the park's daily puppet shows were held on the ground just above common graves. In 2001, in Santa Fé, a family saw the floor of their garage collapse, exposing a hidden chamber with rooms underneath, the remains of another former secret camp. On occasion, camps reveal more than just remains. Thus, in April 2007, a series of police searches in clandestine sweatshops employing undocumented 'slave' foreign workers exposed Automotores Orletti, a well-known camp of El Proceso, as hosting one such workhouse.

While major camps are being turned into 'sites for memory', discussion about the fate of several others will decisively shape both urban aesthetics and the political in the years to come. A 'museum of memory' supported by the municipal government has already opened in Rosario and there are proposals to turn several former camps into museums. A memorial was built in the remains of Club Atlético – demolished in 1977 to build a highway and unearthed by an archaeological team in 2002, and others are projected in the facilities of El Olimpo, in the aforementioned Automotores Orletti, and at a house in Virrey Cevallos. Similar plans were announced for the lighthouse in Mar del Plata. In the meantime, programmes aiming to find and recuperate former secret camps have been established by the city of Buenos Aires and by human rights organization Memoria Abierta. Major projects such as the 14-hectare Parque de la Memoria, opened in 2001, as well as plazas and memorials consolidate the presence of human rights in Argentina's urban landscape.

On 24 March 2007, the anniversary of the coup, Kirchner presented his apologies, this time in La Perla, an army facility and former death camp in Córdoba where between 2,500 and 3,000 people were secretly held and only 17 survived. The president committed the 25-hectare site to the construction of an *espacio para la memoria* – a 'site for memory'. Ana, one of the camp's survivors, conveyed the significance of the breaching of the metallic fence, which allowed people who until then had to pass by

as if sneaking out under tight military controls to start recuperating both histories and stories. Standing there, in the rain, before ‘about 10,000 people’, Ana described ‘the president, the Grandmothers [of the Plaza de Mayo], the relatives, the children of the “disappeared” ... they all were there ... It was truly moving ... and quite contradictory.’ Three platforms were set, she recalls, one for the president and the Commission in charge of administering the site, one for legislators and politicians, and one for survivors, relatives of the ‘disappeared’, and human rights organizations. Ana and others had made human silhouettes that, placed behind the president’s platform, sought to include the ‘disappeared’ in the event. To her surprise, the images were mostly ignored by the press, as the official goal of the event, she concludes, seemed to have been just manufacturing a headline for the media: ‘The President visited La Perla.’ While acknowledging the groundbreaking character of the event, Ana’s depiction brings back to life actors and political positions involved in Argentina’s politics of memory. Like any puzzle, this one contains many pieces. Drawing freely on Mark Neocleous’s work on the politics of reconciliation and redemption (*The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2005), let me identify just a couple of them.

El Cuervo Negro is the nickname of a participant in a chat room, yet of one who posts the picture of a green Ford Falcon, an icon of El Proceso’s paramilitary squads, with the motto *Mantenga limpia Buenos Aires* (‘Keep Buenos Aires clean’). No doubt he and his friends remember, but in ways that are incommensurable, to say the least, with generally accepted notions of memory. Reading 1970s’ Argentine politics as warfare, the narratives populating that chat room justify the terror of El Proceso and combine references to ‘cleaning up’ the nation with recriminations against the military for not having completely exterminated ‘subversive’ Argentines, who are said to dominate the current government. These voices invoke an organic, God-given national community constantly in need to purge its enemies, and suggest that both the democratic regime and human rights organizations humiliate patriots and defend ‘subversives’. Toned-down yet similar arguments appear in pamphlets, on the Internet, and from time to time are made public in events proclaiming ‘complete memory’ or commemorating the dead ‘killed by subversion’. In their assimilation of politics to warfare and their defence of what they call a ‘dirty war’, these voices endorse a politics of terror such as the one of El Proceso. And it is precisely upon the rejection of this politics that the democratic state founds itself.



Alejandro Sehtman



Alejandro Sehtman

Based upon the cancellation of terror, the democratic state advances a politics of reconciliation. Indeed, even though an abyss separates President Menem's pardons, amnesties and attempt to demolish ESMA from Kirchner's decisive human rights policies, appeals to *reconciliation* appear as a common thread linking their politics. That Kirchner conditioned reconciliation to 'justice and memory, and truth', posing the need to bring perpetrators to trial, whereas *Menemista* politics connected it to oblivion, is no doubt a key difference. Yet both express alternatives through which the democratic state seeks to turn atrocities and sites of slaughter materialized by its previous, authoritarian, face into narratives and spaces where a reconciled and re-imagined national community can come together to 'move on'. With the inclusion of official apologies, trials and memorials, in these recent years Argentina has seen the most progressive expression (possible?) of these politics.

Still, even if having the country's highest executive authority put to the service of truth, justice and human rights seems unquestionable, Kirchner's visits to both ESMA and La Perla triggered controversy. Why? First, problems surround the very notion of reconciliation. Drawing on her own experience, Ana notes that only individuals can reconcile, as reconciliation is a personal 'not a political thing'. If Ana is right, then a survivor may decide to pardon a perpetrator, but people cannot reconcile with El Proceso's terror, which suggests an inadequate extrapolation advanced by the democratic state. Second, the horizon of a reconciled nation only advances by neutralizing the political. 'It seems surprising', observes Ana, 'but even today it is as if the only respectable witness is the one who "had nothing to do" with politics, the one who was there "by mistake"'. A state politics of reconciliation privileges the moral construction of perpetrators and victims, favouring individual explanations of atrocities and dismissing or reifying the political. Accordingly, trying to expiate its own genocidal violence without losing legitimacy vis-à-vis other forms of coexistence and governance, the Argentine state these days represents the 'disappeared' as innocent victims, martyrs, or at best as mythical heroes engaged with an impossible politics. Finally, and more importantly, state-sponsored memorialization of state terror both represents and treats terror as an exceptional, pathological occurrence that elides its central role in the formation and preservation of modern states. Or, has any state on Earth yet truly purged itself from its means of terror?

‘Memory. The government promises that, if repressing in Santa Cruz, it will build a museum to remember the victims immediately afterwards.’ This sarcastic headline on the cover of *Barcelona* captures what is at stake in the reconciliatory politics of the democratic state, for it involves a rejection of terror and at the same time a preservation of its tools. No irony surrounds the ‘disappearance’ of Jorge Julio López, however. A key witness in the trial that led to the conviction of former police chief Miguel Etchecolatz, López has been missing since September 2006, and his ‘disappearance’ materializes the limits of the state attempt to expiate its past violence while still hosting agents of that terror.

While many groups in civil society endorse reconciliatory views, others draw on different traditions that insinuate elements for a different politics, one of redemption. As Neocleous stresses, following Walter Benjamin, a redemptive standpoint appropriates our ancestors’ legacies while challenging present and future generations to come out with practices that *match*, not mimic, old dreams and struggles for justice and freedom. In Argentina, after 1977, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo’s motto *Con vida los llevaron, con vida los queremos* (‘alive they took them, alive we want them back’) transformed the ‘disappeared’ into a new, radical presence that became part of the political identity of generations. The challenges confronted in developing an alternative politics of memory are visible in the 1986 split of the Mothers. One group, from then on Madres–Línea Fundadora, decided to accept the death of their children to recuperate and bury their remains. Accordingly, they focused on gathering data, favouring the creation of databases and memorials, and challenging the democratic state to fulfil its promises to repair previous wrongdoings. Others, the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, at least officially, chose not to accept the death of the ‘disappeared’. Stressing the political and social commitments of their children, the Asociación privileged different forms of activism, protests, and cultural events, founding a university and progressively adopting a rhetoric of class struggle. In recent years, however, personal ties of de Bonafini with Kirchner have placed this group close to the state. A third group of the mothers, whose sons and daughters were kidnapped together with their babies, created Abuelas, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, devoting themselves to the search and recovery of their grandchildren. In a context where laws impeded trials against perpetrators during the 1990s, the Grandmothers launched lawsuits for the abduction of babies, a crime not included in the pardons. The search for hundreds of missing children gave a prominent role to both the Grandmothers and HIJOS. And it is the politics of the latter that seems the most interesting.

No pardon

‘We do not forget, we do not pardon, we do not reconcile’: HIJOS’s uncompromising politics of memory advances a drastic claim for justice that no positive state law can exhaust. Organized in 1995, a time when pardons and amnesties made prosecutions impossible, HIJOS’s distinctive *escraches* contributed to keeping alive the need for justice and to raising awareness among younger generations. Based on its sustained uncompromising political struggles for remembrance and justice, HIJOS’s demands consistently transcend any state-driven horizon of memorialization while opening up possibilities for a serious redemptive politics. Deserving of special mention is their proposal for the transformation of former camps into ‘spaces for memory’. If state terror sought to annihilate the very possibility of the political, HIJOS propose to transform the *anti-agoras* of the camps into active political spaces, social and political fora for the community. For, as HIJOS knows, if far beyond anything perpetrators could ever imagine, the ‘disappeared’ are still present in Argentina: they and the political debates that have gone with them await redemption.

aesthetics and contemporary art

In collaboration with the Collaborative Research Centre 'Aesthetic Experience and the Dissolution of Artistic Limits' (CRC 626), Free University Berlin

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Dorothea von Hantelmann

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artist and writer (New York)

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Director of the Van Abbemuseum,
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