THE MILITARY AGAINST THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CASE OF ARGENTINA

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One of the most popular jokes heard during the last Argentine military dictatorship (1976-1983) was about a panic-stricken rabbit trying to cross the border.

- *Why are you running away?*, **the soldier asks.**

- *Because the government is killing all the elephants*, **the rabbit answers.**

- *But you are not an elephant. You are a rabbit.*

- *That's what I think. But...How can I prove it?*[1]

In Argentina, military interventions had a long political history when the 1976 coup occurred. The civilian-military insurrection of September 6, 1930, that brought down the Radical government (the first government elected in democratic elections after the imposition of the universal and secret ballot in 1912), denoted the beginning of an unstable political period. With the recurrence of a cycle of crises and disintegration of both civilian and military governments, the surface of Argentine politics acquired a uniform texture in which each cycle was distinguished from its predecessor only by the increased violence and intensity it provoked. From 1955 onwards, after the military coup that brought down the government of Juan Domingo Peron, a general himself, the cleavages in Argentine politics became deeper and deeper. On the one hand, the military tried to dismantle the political model which had prevailed throughout the preceding decade. These efforts were supported by a broad political front which included all the non-Peronist parties, the corporate and ideological representatives of the urban and rural middle classes and bourgeoisie, and the Church. On the other hand, the unifying symbol of the return of Peron and of Peronist Argentina was transformed into a fundamental political objective.

Paradoxically, the leaders of the 1955 coup characterised the Peronist regime as a totalitarian dictatorship and raised the banners of democracy and liberty. Since then, the term democracy has had at least an ambiguous meaning for Argentine society. As Marcelo Cavarozzi (in O'Donnel and Whitehead 1986, 27) pointed out,

> *Many anti-Peronists shared the rather naive notion that Peronists had subscribed to their particular political creed as a result of demagoguery, illusion, and force. Consequently, the anti-Peronists believed that mere denunciation of the*

"crimes of the dictatorship", accompanied by collective re-education, would result in the gradual reabsorption of ex-Peronists into "democratic" parties and unions. This illusion was short-lived: Peronism survived the fall of its government and became the source of a vigorous opposition movement. In the short term, however, this illusion effectively allowed the anti-Peronists to claim that the proscription of Peronism was an essentially democratic act.

The tradition of authoritarian practices in the name of libertarian principles had begun.

Peronism in power had tended to consider the activities of the opposition parties as manifestations of illegitimate sectoral interests and, consequently, the government increasingly blocked such activities. Opposition politicians were imprisoned and all the newspapers were expropriated by the government. Peronism became a sort of religion: school children learnt to read repeating phrases like "I love Peron" or "my mother is Evita". All in the name of "democracy for the working class" in opposition to "liberal democracy".[2]

The policy of "total extermination" of Peronism from Argentine society that started on September 1955, after the coup, had the same degree of authoritarianism. The anti-Peronists gathered the available literature on Juan Peron and his ex wife, Eva Peron, and set them aflame. They were doing the same sort of things as Peronism, which they were accusing of having been a dictatorship. The democratic parties supported the electoral proscription of Peronism and the prohibition on Peron's return to his country. For seventeen years (1955-1973), while Peron was in exile in Madrid, the very word "Peron" was prohibited, not only in public but also in private use. Neighbour denounced neighbour for pronouncing it. Resistance groups wrote on the walls ***Luche y Vuelve*** (Fight and he will come back) because they could not paint his name. And when Peron came back into the government, he did it with the slogan ***"alpargatas si, libros no"*** (worker sandals yes, books no), to express the scorn of the working class and the left for the university and intellectuals. As the writer Abelardo Castillo told me once, "Argentina has an illness that we can call the pathology of the word. The Right believe that if you do not pronounce the words, the things do not exist. They prohibited the name Peron and they believed for seventeen years that he no longer existed. Until he came back with 87 per cent of the votes in an incredible democratic election. And the Left think that if they write the words, the things exist. They paint revolution on the walls and they think that Peron is Fidel Castro."[3]

Even though it is incontrovertible that during the last Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983) the level and danger of authoritarianism reached a dimension never seen before, it is also true that the culture of fear, the limits on civil society and general censorship were not an invention of this military government but the main political arms of the leading class in Argentina in this century.

Authoritarianism and the Public Sphere

On June 20, 1973 Juan Peron returned to Argentina after seventeen years in exile. Two million people were waiting for him at Ezeiza airport. Thousands of young people that had been born after the military coup of 1955 were there asking for a return to the Golden Days. The social spectrum as a whole had shifted to the left during these years. The intellectual field not only shifted along with the rest of society but was one of the main forces of change. From it came many of the boldest impulses toward the left including, of course, the new left born inside Peronism. The Argentine writer and political scientist Beatriz Sarlo explains that,

In the Argentina of the 1970s, revolution was not only thought possible, this was the order of the day, and, moreover, it was deemed beautiful, aestheticizable. The

long history of misunderstandings between politics and literature seemed to have been buried once and for all in the "new deal" in which Latin America artists and revolutionaries were collaborating. (...) An atmosphere of imminent revolution shaped the "structure of feeling" in the early 1970s, to borrow one of Raymond Williams's expressions. The intellectual field was deeply affected by the concerns and tensions spilling over from other social spaces. The tone of the era's hegemonic problem was profoundly political (Sarlo 1992, 102).

Perhaps the writer Julio Cortazar best expressed this intellectual ideology when, at the Casa de las Americas in La Havana, Cuba, he stated that there were room for all the literary genres within the revolution and that outside of it no genuine art would be possible. Cortazar was just quoting one of the most repeated slogans of the last years of 1960s. Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and the Mao conferences in the Uan'an forum, among others, provided the focus for the aesthetic debates. The adjective "militant" was added to all expressions of cultural or public life. The literature became "the armoured rose, militant literature" and the cinema "militant cinema" with the prescription "to use the camera like a rifle". The universities were transformed into a permanent assembly where people discussed the policy to be adopted by the revolutionary groups. The streets became the main political arena. During the days different groups manifested for or against something; at night, in the book shops and cafes that were open all hours, people discussed politics. "***La Hora de los Hornos***" (The Hour of the Furnaces) — a four hour documentary made by Fernando Solanas, Octavio Getino and Gerardo Vallejo, which recommended "revolution", expressed through Peronism, as the only deliverance from the "neo-colonialism" and the backwardness Argentine society allegedly found itself in — became a box-office hit in the Buenos Aires' cinemas. ***Descamisados***, the magazine of the Montoneros, the armed left group identified with Peronism, was the best selling magazine in the country.

The sociologist Lyman Chaffee (1993) points out that

Argentinean street demonstrations have evolved into a form analogous to a social sporting event. (...) Groups seek to score political points to politicise, to defend their ideas, their power, their territory, to keep their name before the public and to influence policy. One means to this end is the ritual of taunting/scapegoating, for rhetoric is an integral dimension of the demonstration culture. Its political aim is to socialise, give an identity and a sense of belonging.

The War against the Press

In reviewing the post-coup acts and decrees related to political activity in Argentina, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (1980, 16) concluded:

On March 24, 1976, all political activity in Argentina ceased, and the democratic system of lawmaking through elected representatives, with the free participation of the press and citizens in support of, or in opposition to, any project, was replaced by a system in which, in the final analysis, only the will of the three commanding generals of the armed forces count.

In the month of the coup, the media were forbidden from informing about, commenting on, or making reference to, the tactics employed by the military for dealing with political dissidents without prior consultation with the authorities. With the exception of the ***Buenos Aires Herald*** and ***La Opinion***, most newspapers strictly adhered to the new instructions. The attacks on journalists were systematic and the number of victims in proportion to the

numbers of professionals working in this field was extremely high. As the National Commission (the official Commission that started investigating the cases of Human Rights' violation after the beginning of the democratic government) pointed out, this was neither casual nor accidental: "Besides being directed against culture in a general sense, which is always treated with suspicion by dictatorships, it is clear that this attack on journalists was an attempt to silence a very important group in society" (National Commission 1986, 362-63). The first inkling of the way things were going to be came on the day of the military coup. On March 24, 1976, the Junta of the Commanders in Chief published their communiqué Number 19 where they wrote: "Anyone who by any means emits, spreads or propagates news, communiqués or images with a view to upsetting, prejudicing or demeaning the activity of the Armed, Security, or police forces, will be liable to punishment of up to ten years in prison."[4]

In the same week, the military took over the ***Federacion Argentina de Trabajadores de Prensa*** (Argentine Journalists' Federation), foreign news agency correspondents were expelled from the country, many journalists were imprisoned or disappeared or were killed in the street. In the course of 1976 at least forty-five journalists were detained in an illegal fashion, and to this day nothing more has been heard of them. In the first eight months of 1977, a further thirty journalists disappeared; and it is estimated that the total number of journalists who suffered the same fate was about a hundred. A further one hundred journalists were actually imprisoned without ever being brought to trial after March 24, 1976. In addition, a number of journalists fled the country when faced with the danger of a threat to their lives. The National Commission said in its last report that "journalists were seen as a threat to the secrecy that was meant to surround the illegal, repressive system of disappearances, which was aimed at paralysing the nation with fear. The mere possibility of some testimonies eventually being published, or of someone being given information on what was going on, was considered by the regime a major threat to its policies. (...) Those who where engaged in journalism had to feel the full weight of the repression, to discourage the slightest criticism of the government right from the start, and so avoid any public confirmation of the ghastly fate of thousands of citizens who had been kidnapped."[5]

In the strategically more important world of TV and radio, the junta's control of free expression was even more blatant. The four State-controlled television channels and the bulk of radio stations had their management boards made up of officers with few technical or cultural qualifications. The British journalist Jimmy Burns (1987, 19) describes the situation as follows:

> *In one memorable performance, which in Europe and the United States would have provoked horror among programme planners, the Chancellor spoke for a mammoth two and a half hours. News slots were given over to military ceremonies and speeches by junta members. This was accompanied by a large dose of light entertainment, designed to underline the junta's self projected image of surface calm and normality. The viewing public was anaesthetised in other words. Argentina's cultural elite - the best of the country's authors, directors, actors and musicians - were, of course, excluded from the screens. Judged politically suspect, hundreds were placed on an official "black list" of banned artists. The Junta completed its "cultural revolution" by censoring films and plays, and purging teachers and curricula from the universities and schools.*

After the collapse of military dictatorship (1983-84), three different although complementary discourses on the behaviour of the press developed: the well-documented denunciation of the obsequious press; the position of those who claimed ignorance and

assured everyone that they would never again aid a dictatorship; and those who looked for profit from showing the details of the horror. "The combination of these three views showed a distorted image of the past and of the behaviour of the press employees, as if the killers and their ideology were working thanks to general ignorance," says Horacio Verbitsky, former head of the journalist trade union in the 1970s and one of the most prestigious journalists at that time. Verbitsky says that "this is true only if we refer to the whole society, which took years and years to build, with the small and separate puzzle pieces they had been collecting, the face of the horror. This was a face that could be dissimulated thanks to censorship and the secret methodology used by the state to execute its violent policy." But it is also true that journalists knew what was happening, the information was common in the newspapers' headquarters, the TV and radio stations. "We received envelopes each day with information and data, some of them written by other journalist who did not want to resign themselves to the silence, even when they could not publish the information in their own media," Verbitsky explains.[6]

He asserts that "the kidnapping of people — some of them children, the military operations, the sacking of the victims' houses, the concentration camps are not new revelations. We knew about them while they were happening. We did not ignore the revenge against the families of activists, the murder of children, the assassination of babies, we did not ignore the fact that they were throwing into the river bodies that were still alive." General Videla, he says, had said in his Christmas speech 1975 that "the military fight is only ten per cent of the war," while, "the remaining 90 per cent is composed of political, economic and social ingredients." For Verbitsky, "three months later, in March 1976, he assumed the presidency after the military coup and afterward he committed himself to deal with this 90 per cent."[7]

How could it be, then, that people seemed to be so unaware of what was happening? What happened to the journalists? It is true that millions of eyes and ears were seeing and listening to what was happening, but it is also possible that they could not understand because each episode did not translate the horror of the global plan. As in the Holocaust, the first mistake of the politicians and activists was a lack of belief in the magnitude of the Horror.

On March 24, 1977, the journalist Rodolfo Walsh sent to the media a "public letter to the Junta" denouncing the dimension of the repression that was going on all over the country, the human rights violations and the economic problems which characterised the military regime. The letter finished saying: "Con la certeza de no ser escuchado, con la seguridad de ser perseguido, pero fiel a mi compromiso de decir la verdad aun en los momentos dificiles" ("with the certainty of not being listened to; with the security of being persecuted, but faithful to my obligation of saying the truth, even in the most difficult moments").[8] The next day, he was killed in Buenos Aires by a group of military people wearing civilian clothes. The same night, according to the neighbours' account, about forty heavily- armed men had surrounded his house and had attacked it for more than two hours before they realised it was empty. They had even thrown grenades at the building. All his belongings were ransacked. Among the valuable objects stolen from his house were the originals of his work, including unpublished material from a long and distinguished writing career. Verbitsky, who is writing a biography of Walsh, told me that,

> *Rodolfo Walsh always wondered what a journalist could do in that situation. And he said: first, do not give in to terror; then, help others to be free from fear. Finally, to organise communication networks, with simple but effective media. He was doing this when they killed him. For instance writing very simple reports with news, on*

his old type-writer, and sending copies to the newspapers. But the military not only killed him, they never even brought back his corpse, so that there is no physical place to go to pay an homage; even we do not know exactly in which area he was killed.[9]

The attacks on journalists were not the only strategy of the military government. Military "intervenors" were put in the command of all civil and social organisations in Argentina: from radio and TV stations, to the Ballet company, the Housewife's organisation or the animal rights groups. Captain Clodomiro Enrique Nunez, head of the TV stations, published the directives to all the TV journalist and producers in August 1976. Among them we can find these definitions of what could never been show on TV:

(...) about violence: we understand that violence is not only physical or mental aggression, but all action against the regular mood, or outside reason or justice. Violence is not only in what we know as žaction' programs but in all the situations that have to do with unchristian families, sex, viciousness and ideology. (...) in the case of the family, all material that is considered violent will not be transmitted, that is all material that a) destroys the image of the parents b) justifies the rebellion of the sons and daughters c) introduces the notion of sex as part of marriage d) shows divorces e) shows adulteries f) mentions abortion g) shows abandoned children, old people or ill people. These cases would only be possible if the end of the story is about the integration of the family h) shows a pregnant women in labour or child birth (...) about sex: all material will be considered untransmittable that a) presents people with an abnormal sexual life b) shows anything other than the normal concept of sex c) shows prostitution d) shows scenes of love, dancing or indecent dialogues.[10]

During the war against "intellectual subversion" numerous books in private and public libraries were seized and burnt. On 29 April 1976, Lieutenant Colonel Jorge Eduardo Gorleri, head of the 14th regiment, invited journalists to witness a public burning of books by Marxist authors, or those with a similar philosophy, that had been confiscated from different book shops in the city. Gorleri said on that occasion they were going to burn "pernicious literature which affects our intellect and our Christian way of being...and ultimately our most traditional spiritual ideals, encapsulated in the words God, Country and Home."[11]

But among the books and authors prohibited were also J.J. Rousseau, Antoine Saint-Exupery and his ***Le Petit Prince***, Jacques Prevert and his ***Children's Tales***, the biographies of Isadora Duncan, Pablo Neruda, Julio Cortazar, Octavio Paz. Sometimes, the person prohibiting the books was just a soldier who was after a bureaucratic solution. And in this tragic situation, funny things used to happen, like when in the Book Fair of 1977 you could find ***Das Kapital*** and ***The Holy Family*** by Karl Marx, because the names seemed to belong to the Western Christian civilisation, but not the ***Red Book***, a compilation of stories for children because of the connotations of the word "red".

The Institutional Act of June 18, 1976, defined "failure to observe basic moral principles in the exercise of public, political or union offices or activities that involve the public interest" as "injurious to the national interest".[12] The journalist and writer Jacobo Timmerman told me that, after being imprisoned and tortured, he met with one of the members of the junta and asked him for the "rationality" of the process:

One of the most elaborate definitions was: Argentina has three main enemies: Karl Marx, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of society; Sigmund Freud, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of family, and Albert Einstein, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of time and space.[13]

A State of Fear - The Public Sphere and Terror

As soon as he took office, General Jorge Rafael Videla, the first president of the military dictatorship (1976-1980) said at a press conference: "un terrorista es no solamente alguien con un revolver o una bomba, sino todo aquel que disemina ideas que son contrarias a la civilizacion occidental y cristiana" ("a terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilisation").[14] In such a broad framework, fear and silence became a mandatory way of life. The method of kidnapping persons followed by their disappearance and the official refusal of the organisations responsible to acknowledge their whereabout was practised in thousands of cases over a long period of time. It was state terrorism on a large scale that included, among other things, the indiscriminate use of torture, the withholding of information, the creation of a climate of fear, the marginalization of judicial power, the uncertainty of families, and the deliberate confusion of public opinion.

The minute they had taken power in March 1976, the military government dissolved congress and provincial legislative bodies; it removed the president and vice-president from office along with provincial governors, municipal officers, the members of the Supreme Court and the higher provincial court. Declaring itself the "Supreme Organ of the nation", the "junta" (one member for each one of the armed forces) assumed the full powers formally held by both executive and legislative bodies.

Emilio Fermin Mignone, a professor who had been Minister of Education of a former dictatorship (1966-73) and became a human rights activist after the military kidnapped his adolescent daughter in 1976, described the situation as follows:

> *No one was safe. Anyone's home could be broken into in the middle of the night and the occupants made to disappear. Books and magazines, sometimes whole libraries or book shops, were hidden or burned. Journalists knew that an imprudent sentence could result in their disappearance or maybe a fire at the newspaper office. Lawyers refused to intervene or to sign even the most innocent legal paper, such as a writ of habeas corpus. They knew that dozens of their colleagues had been detained. Doctors denied treatment to those they suspected of being linked to the dissident organisations. Book stores could not carry publications that could be described as subversive. And everyone knew how broadly the military defined this term. Almost everyone was silenced. People looked over their shoulders and parroted absurd justifications (Mignone 1992, 252).*

As Studs Terkel has argued there exist cases where people are conditioned "not to have a sense of history". In his case study of the impact of the American depression on Chicago blue-collar workers, Terkel found that experiences were perceived as individual, almost chance, not collective; unemployment was seen as being personal bad luck, or personal failure, rather than a shared experience with outside causes (see Fentress and Wickham 1992). In the same way, in research about social memory of the Fascist period, Luisa Passerini asserts that she found "inconsistencies and silences in informant's descriptions of life under fascism, which, in effect, they had often virtually wiped from their memories. This omission was not only a rejection of an unacceptable period of history (as opposed to the years of militancy in the early 1920s or of the resistance in 1943-45) but also a real victory of Fascism in restricting people's consciousness to their private lives or to the work ethic" (Passerini 1988, 121).

In the case of Argentina, I think that the imposition of the culture of fear and the destruction of the public sphere deprived the society of any space in which to share individual memories and the mechanisms to construct a social memory.

The most recent studies on political fear have characterised it as the inability of social actors to predict the consequences of their behaviour because public authority is arbitrarily and brutally exercised. In one of the latest analyses of fear in Latin American dictatorships, Manual Antonio Garreton affirms that,

> *The southern cone military regimes, more than other dictatorships, were institutionalised systems that deliberately produced and spread fear ... fear was aroused indirectly in the winners because they could never entirely eliminate the awareness of their crimes and complicity and it was installed both directly and indirectly in society as a whole through the combined effect of repressive policies, the absence of institutional protection and the superimposed model of social transformation (Garreton 1992, 18).*

The methods of repression adopted by Argentine military authorities were intended to humiliate, demoralise and terrify a broad population beyond the particular persons detained for punishment. The persons detained were subjected to treatment designed to remove their dignity and sense of self. On the one hand, government officials would deny that disappeared persons had ever been prisoners. The survivors and their families, on the other hand, were likely to communicate these abuses in one form or another, with the intended effect of augmenting fear. Victims were often kidnapped with a public show of force and then made to disappear with no public acknowledgement of their existence or whereabouts. According to the National Commission, it was not unusual for several vehicles - automobiles, trucks, vans as well as a helicopter to surround the victim's home (Garreton 1992, 8). One of the most striking examples of this is the letter Rodolfo Walsh sent to a close friend, describing the last moments of the life of his daughter, journalist Victoria (Vicky):

> *The last year of her life was extremely hard. Her husband, Emiliano Costa, disappeared at the beginning of 1975. Their daughter was born three months after. (...) Like so many adolescents, suddenly adults, she was running away for two years, jumping from house to house. She never complained: just her smile became vague. In the last weeks, many of her comrades were killed: she could not stop to cry for them. (...) On the 28th September, when she came into the house on Corro Street, it was her 26th birthday. Her daughter was with her. (...) Some hours later, she heard the first shot. She went upstairs, to the terrace. I could picture the scene in my mind's eye: 150 men, a tank, a helicopter, a complete army against her. She was fighting against them with her gun for an hour and a half. A soldier told me the story: "Suddenly, he said, there was silence. The lady left her gun, stood up and opened her arms. We stopped shooting although the captain ordered us to go on. She started speaking in a loud but quiet voice. We could see her: she was very thin, and beautiful, with short hair...and she was wearing a large, white night-dress.*
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> *--You are not killing me. I am choosing to die, she said, and put the gun on her heart, and pulled the trigger." The tank broke the door of the house and the captain and their men went inside shooting to the air, the windows and the roof. They just found a baby, sitting on a bed, looking at them quietly. Vicky: memory is our only cemetery. (National Commission 1986, 205)*

The political scientist Patricia Weiss Fagen explains that "the intimidation and terror were employed not merely to forestall any possibility of response by the victims" but that "they were also intended to terrorise all those living nearby" (Weiss Fagen 1992, 63). Normally, the traffic was brought to a halt, loudspeakers, searchlights, bombs and grenades

were used in an excessive show of force that made the neighbours realise that undoubtedly they would never see the victim again. The same situation was present in the clandestine centres of detention, conceived for the subjection of victims to a meticulous and deliberate stripping of all human attributes, rather than for their simple physical elimination. To achieve this end, attempts were made to break down the captives' identity; their spatio-temporal points of reference were disrupted and their minds and bodies tortured beyond imagination. Finally, by one way or another, the news was disseminated, by families and neighbours, or by means of testimonies published by respected human rights organisations. Paradoxically, these denunciations helped the military in their work to impose terror, confirming for the public the reality of their worst fears. The case of Alejandra Jaimovich was widely known. She was abducted at the age of eighteen as a member of a group called The Guevarist Youth, which by then she had long left. When her parents asked the government why she had been killed, they answered that "she was not considered a threat then, but military evaluation said she would be a security risk in six years time" (Weiss Fagen 1992, 27). Although repression was presented as a war against armed subversion (the "global war" or the "Third World War"), terror spilled over well beyond the limited zone of counter insurgency operations. In a rural area like Tucuman, in the north of the country, 200,000 members of the armed forces were mobilised into combat against a subversive group of less than 500 men. The repression affected, then, non-violent opponents to the regime, intermediate trade unions' delegates, students, civilian politicians, professional groups (lawyers, psychiatrists, artists, scientists, the clergy, etc.) and relatives of the initial victims (cf. Frontalini and Caiati 1984).

The threatening of the family, and the clear intention to destroy it as a source of self defence for the group used all the most atrocious methods. It was common practice during the repression to seize one or more members of the family of the person sought, to obtain information on their whereabouts by threats and violence, or with the aim of provoking him/her to come forward and surrender. Thus siblings, mothers, fathers and even grandparents were illegally arrested, violently treated and at times made to disappear in the search for one member of the family who was under suspicion. In other cases, pregnant women were tortured and after giving birth their babies were sold to families of the armed forces that wanted a son or a daughter, or children were tortured in the presence of their parents.

One of the government's advertisement at that time was: Madre, sabe donde esta su hijo ahora? (Mother, do you know who your son is with now?) The other was a huge placard on the Obelisco, the main symbol-monument of Buenos Aires: El silencio es salud (Silence is Health). A joke told of an official meeting a soldier on his first day of military service: "Soldier, from this day to the end of your life you should walk through the streets looking carefully at all things. If it moves, you shoot. If it is immobile, you paint it green". It was more than a joke: hundreds of car drivers were shot on the road during the summer holidays because they did not heed the order to stop given by the transport controllers and the whole country's tree trunks were painted green to signify order.

The fear imposed on this scale made people look to the only alternative and take refuge in the private realm in the hope of finding minimal security in intimacy. Atomised individuals and fragmented groups simply tried to be safe. In the culture of fear, says the political scientist Juan Corradi,

> *The blurring of boundaries between a private and a public sphere takes on the form of a perverse dialectic. On the one hand, the private spheres becomes vulnerable to sudden, brutal and arbitrary intrusions on the part of the authorities. On the other hand, the authorities cease to operate in a true public fashion. Punishment becomes*

> *secretive, unavowed, in what amount to the privatisation of state coercion. Under terrorist regimes there is a dual structure: a public facade of business as usual beneath which a network of lawless areas grows unimpeded. This perverse dialectic allows, in turn, the proliferation of inadequate adaptations, a mixture of secondary responses and defence mechanism. Thus the ostensive concern with safety covers a mounting sense of insecurity; manifest loquacity envelops a desolate silence; sheepishness coexists with bravado (Corradi 1992, 272).*

In this sort of regime, the very notion of public good is muted, and an intense form of self surveillance develops. All conspire to draw people away from public life into private spheres: fears about talking freely in front of neighbours and colleagues, suspicions of strange people in unaccustomed places and reluctance to pursue friendships with new acquaintances follow. The Argentine poet Maria Elena Walsh said that,

> *Since they were in power we have become like babies. We can not say what we think and less what we imagine. This is the country Kindergarten. Once I said: the problem is that, when they finally leave, we will be old, tired, with nothing to say. Like two old people sitting on a park bench asking each other: and...what did we use to be? They transformed one of the most lucid cultural centres of the world into a Kindergarten, into a machine that can make only silly — but holy! — things. Among the intellectuals, we only know of treasons, denunciations, suspects, presumption, ...we are condemned to an eternal interchange of offences and rancour, and bitterness... Forget all about living together. We only have a perpetual necessity of revenge (Corradi 1992, 284).*

As people turn inward, there is less contact or communication among different social sectors, fewer possibilities for collective action, and greater personal frustration. The public sphere shrinks, and the private sphere is strained. The rigid mechanism of control, the imposition of violence as a systematic attribute of the society, made all sorts of groups and networks collapse. In the Argentine society at the end of the 1970s, subjects were no longer interpellated or recognised as belonging to a familiar central subject (class, government, party) and then the state withdrew from the public sphere to ensconce itself in the old arcane dominions, from whence it struck arbitrarily, in a sort of "re-feudalization" of the country.

If one of the main reasons for the collapse of the public sphere was this atomisation of society under the culture of terror that made individuals defenceless against arbitrary assaults and the destruction of all legally defined boundaries between the state and the civil society, it is also true that the notion of individual rights has not been on the agenda of the dominant political formations in Argentina in the last century. For Peronism as well as for the left, individual rights was always a "bourgeois" conception: neither civil liberties nor claims of protection against arbitrary authority produced enthusiasm. However the dimension of the situation during the last dictatorship was clearly different, neither freedom nor democracy had even been in the discourse of the Argentine parties during this century. "Human rights", says Ronaldo Munck, "were largely a mystification, in that contrast individual formal rights with social inequality. Against the reality of power, class antagonism and poverty, the very idea of citizenship appears illusory" (Munck 1989, 186). From the fascist Right to the communist Left, the distinction between "real democracy" and "formal democracy" always finished by justifying censorship, repression of the opposition and limits to individual freedom. An episode that occurred in 1951 serves as a good example: the democratic parliament voted in favour of the expropriation of a newspaper, La Prensa, because it was "against the interest of the working class". They

not only expropriated the newspaper from its owners but also gave it to the Confederacion General del Trabajo, the Central Trade Union, as a present.

Corradi (1992, 272) maintains that Argentina has been subjected to three types of authoritarian regimes: a temporary arbitrary dictatorship, a dictatorship ***sine die*** with developmental goals, and a dictatorship ***sine die*** with negative reconstructionist objectives. "All emerged from complex distributions of fear, all engaged in some sort of fear mongering, and the last type resorted to terror as an instrument of policy." This history of authoritarianism made the Argentine society specially vulnerable and the dictatorship particularly effective. If the distinction between the private and the public sphere makes the individual's protection against arbitrary assaults on their integrity possible, for it to be effective, this distinction must be sanctioned by legally defined boundaries and by a culturally based notion of individual rights. Neither the former nor the latter existed in Argentine society in the moment of the Coup. Arbitrary practices just found a virgin land without shared values or solidified social experiences on freedom and individual rights. Guillermo O'Donnell (1986) claims that,

> *By trivialising citizenship and repressing political identities, authoritarian rule destroys self organised and autonomously defined political spaces and substitutes them for a state controlled public arena in which discussion of issues must be made in codes and terms established by the rulers — give or take a few tolerated dissidents and some mavericks carefully ignored by the regime controlled media.*

O'Donnell also maintains that the usual emphasis on the regressive social and economic policies of the military regimes should not blind us to the equally important, if less spectacular, regimentation of daily life: the government does not offer individuals any reasons for doing what they are told to do. They neither ask nor wonder if they should have the right to ask. Corradi (1985) explains that "in many instances, the population was made into an accomplice to the very acts perpetrated against it. This pattern of forced complicity was enacted widely in the armed forces."

The involvement of the population on a large scale was brought about through the elaboration of a discourse of a "summary justice" in the controlled or self-censored media. This discourse attempted to identify the "people" with security forces, on one side of the divide, and the persons who not only actively fought against the regime, but who willingly or unwillingly assisted those who did, who sympathised with them in the past or who even remained indifferent, with the "enemy" on the other side. Bauman's (1989, 206) description of life under a repressive regimes is apt here:

> *The inhuman world created by a homicidal tyranny dehumanized its victims and those who passively watch the victimization by pressing both to use the logic of self preservation as absolutism for moral insensibility and inaction. No one can be proclaimed guilty for the shear fact of breaking down under such pressure, yet no one can be excused from moral self deprecation for such surrender.*

This situation in Argentina undermined the very basis on which individuals became citizens and could try to act collectively. The public person had no role in this disciplinary society, there was no public control of power, no freedom of the press or of association, and there was not even the idea of their very possibility. Then, people became accustomed to controls, and the idea of free communication in a democratic society gave way to the idea of obedience.

Notes:

1. "Furthermore, one can detect, in the absence of freedom of expression, an increased propensity to grasp double meanings. One need only scan the newspapers of the Fascist period to note the recurrence of so-called puns-plainly silly and almost meaningless remarks which suggest that the general repression had turned everything into a laughing matter," says Luisa Passerini in her essay on humour under *fascism Fascism in Popular Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992).

2. During the Peronist Government, schools became "Schools of Doctrine" and the students, from the Kindergarten to the High School, had to learn the basis of Peronism. Teachers who did not belong the Peronist Party were not able to work.

3. The opinion of Castillo is shared by the sociologist Alfredo Delich, who held a conference in the Universidad de Buenos Aires in April, 1984 on "Argentina and the World Syndrome".

4. *Diario Clarin.* March 25, 1976, Buenos Aires.

5. *Diario Clarin.* March 25, 1976, Buenos Aires.

6. Horacio Verbitsky is currently political editorialist of the newspaper *Pagina 12* in Buenos Aires. Among other books he has written *Hacer la Corte* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta, 1993), *Robo Para La Corona* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta, 1991) and *Ezeiza* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Contrapunto, 1984). He was leader of the trade union of journalists between 1970-75 and was living in exile in Peru during the dictatorship. He is writing a biography of Rodolfo Walsh.

7. From a personal interview.

8. From Rodolfo Walsh's personal archive that is kept by Horacio Verbitsky.

9. Ibid.

10. *Diario Clarin.* August 25, 1976, Buenos Aires.

11. *Diario La Razon.* April 29, 1976, Buenos Aires.

12. *Diario Clarin.* July 19, 1976, Buenos Aires.

13. Jacobo Timmerman was the editor of the newspaper *La Opinion* when the military coup took place. After most of the journalists and trade union workers of his newspapers were kidnapped during the first months of the military government he himself was kidnapped and tortured. He was freed some months later after the pressure of the governments of the United States and Israel. He wrote a book about this experience entitled *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

14. *Diario Clarin.* February 17, 1978, Buenos Aires.

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VOJSKA PROTI JAVNOSTI

POVZETEK

Med zadnjo diktaturo (1976-1983) je avtoritarnost vojaškega režima dosegla najvišjo stopnjo v Argentini, vendar pa kultura strahu, omejevanje civilne družbe in splošna cenzura niso bili odkritje vojaškega režima, ampak kar celotne argentinske politične elite tega stoletja. Vsaj od vojaškega udara leta 1955, ko je bil zrušen Peronov režim, ki so ga pučisti označevali za totalitarno diktaturo, in ko se je začela avtoritarna praksa v imenu libertarnih načel, ima pojem "demokracija" v Argentini dvoumen pomen. Po povratku Perona iz izgnanstva v Španiji leta 1973 je bilo vse v pričakovanju revolucije; nastopil naj bi nekakšen latinskoameriški "new deal", ki bi odpravil vse pretekle nesporazume. A že po slabih treh letih, marca 1976, je bilo politične aktivnosti konec. Po vojaškem puču je štela le še volja treh poveljujočih generalov v argentinskih vojaških silah. Uvedena je bila stroga cenzura, tuji novinarji so bili izgnani, mnogo novinarjev je bilo zaprtih in ubitih. Državno radiotelevizijo in zasebne radijske postaje so nadzorovali oficirji. Vojaška komanda je bila postavljena na čelo vseh civilnih organizacij - od radijskih in TV postaj do organizacij gospodinj in društev za varstvo živali. Stotnik Nunez, ki je "poveljeval" televiziji, je objavil direktivo vsem novinarjem in urednikom, v kateri je bilo natančno določeno, česa televizija ne sme prikazovati. To je bil le del boja proti "intelektualni subverziji". Uradna "definicija" terorizma je vključevala tudi "razširjanje idej, ki so nasprotne zahodni in krščanski civilizaciji". Strah in tišina sta postala obvezen način življenja. Zavladal je državni terorizem, ki je med drugim vključeval nenadzorovano uporabo sile, mučenje, zadrževanje informacij (npr. o "pogrešanih osebah"), marginalizacijo sodne oblasti in manipulacijo javnega mnenja. Strah je povzročala nesposobnost družbenih akterjev, da bi predvideli posledice lastnega ravnanja, ker je bila javna oblast izvajana arbitrarno in brutalno. Najbolj brutalne metode represije, ki so jih uporabljale argentinske vojaške oblasti, so imele namen ponižati, demoralizirati in prestrašiti celotno prebivalstvo, in to je oblastem tudi uspevalo. Vseprisotni strah je silil ljudi v zasebno sfero v upanju, da bodo v njej našli vsaj minimalno varnost in intimnost. Zaprtost v zasebnost pa je hkrati še zmanjševala možnosti medsebojnega komuniciranja med različnimi družbenimi

akterji in kolektivne akcije ter povečevala osebne frustracije. Javna sfera se je krčila in zasebna sfera je bila pod vse večjimi pritiski. Poleg tega pa je kolaps javne sfere povzročala tudi odsotnost problematike človekovih pravic v ideologijah in programih vseh dominantnih političnih formacij Argentine v 20. stoletju; tako za peronizem kot za levico so bile na primer individualne pravice vedno označevane za "buržuazne", torej povezane le s "formalno demokracijo". V Argentini nikoli ni bila uveljavljena jasna meja med javno in zasebno sfero, ki bi lahko varovala posameznike pred arbitarnim poseganjem v njihovo integriteto, ker taka meja ni bila niti zakonsko definirana niti se v argentinski družbi in (politični) kulturi ni uveljavil pojem človekovih pravic.