

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'Donnell 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

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“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 were 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 “intervenor” 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 be shown 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 ‘action’ 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 woman 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 whereabouts 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 intervoene 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.

