Struggling with the past: the human rights movement and the politics of memory in post-dictatorship Argentina (1983-2006)
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1. **Struggling with the past in Argentina: introduction**

On 24 March 2004, the official commemoration of the military dictatorship in Argentina took place on the doorsteps of one of the greatest symbols of the dictatorship: the Navy Mechanics School, also known as the ESMA (*Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada*). Between 1976 and 1983, part of the ESMA complex had been used as a secret detention centre. It is estimated that approximately 5,000 people were held there in captivity, most of them ending up on the long list of the ‘disappeared’. During a highly emotional ceremony, President Néstor Kirchner signed an agreement that stipulated that the site would be converted into a ‘Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights’. He then apologized in the name of the state ‘for the shame of having remained silent about so many atrocities during twenty years of democracy’. At his side were three young people whose parents had disappeared. All three had been born in captivity in the ESMA. At the foot of the podium were representatives of the human rights organizations, survivors of the ESMA and other secret detention centres, and many other groups and individuals that condemned state terrorism. Shortly after the ceremony, the gates of the ESMA were opened and thousands of people spontaneously entered the terrain and the buildings, thus physically occupying a space that embodied a major symbol of the repression and that had been closed to ordinary citizens for many years.

A long history of struggle concerning the fate of the disappeared and the construction of a collective memory of the military dictatorship preceded the presidential decision to transform the ESMA into a space for memory. Raúl Alfonsín, the President of the democratic transition, ordered the historical trial of the juntas and signed the decree that led to the foundation of the truth commission, which investigated and documented the thousands of disappearances. Yet he was also responsible for two laws that made it possible for most of the culprits to go free. His successor, Carlos Menem, further institutionalized impunity when he decreed two presidential pardons that freed the high-ranking military officers awaiting trial, as well as the junta leaders who had been tried in 1985. Menem stressed the need for reconciliation of all Argentines and pleaded that the past be left behind. ‘The past has nothing more to teach us’, and ‘we must look ahead, with our eyes fixed on the future. Unless we learn to forget, we will be turned into a pillar of salt’, he stated (Feitlowitz 1998: xi). To a large extent, his successors De La Rúa and Duhalde followed a similar line. It was only with Kirchner’s election in 2003 that the official discourse and policies changed. Kirchner’s presidency marked a radical change in official memory policies from those of his predecessors who had, in varying degrees, promoted silence and impunity.

From the very outset, official policies of impunity and silence had been strongly opposed by victims’ organizations, such as the widely known Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and other groups and individuals who constantly campaigned to keep the past on the public

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agenda. These human rights-oriented groups, which were largely composed of victims of the dictatorship, emerged during the peak years of the repression. They acquired a leading role in the process of ‘coming to terms with the past’ that took place in Argentine society under the successive democratic governments after 1983, arguing that democracy could not be truly implemented if the past was not dealt with effectively. This meant investigating the facts of the repression, bringing perpetrators to trial, and constructing a ‘collective memory’ of the military dictatorship. The key concepts of ‘Truth, Justice, and Memory’ came to synthesize these demands. Over time, new actors, among them former political activists, children of the disappeared, students, journalists, intellectuals and neighbours, joined the struggle. They introduced alternative forms of activism and contributed to a deepening of the debate. Changes in the broader political, social and economic context also significantly influenced the struggles over the past and more specifically the meaning attributed to the period of the dictatorship.

This book is about the numerous initiatives to keep the past on the public agenda despite official attempts to close the subject. The groups and individuals involved in the struggle for truth, justice and memory will be at the centre of the analysis. Who are these persons who persistently tried to keep the past on the political agenda and what do they want? What motivates them and how are they influenced in their struggle by personal experiences, identities, beliefs and ideologies and by the larger economic, social and political developments in Argentina? And how do they manage to influence the societal context they are part of? I will show how goals, demands, strategies, and internal relations have transformed over time in a dynamic interaction between civil society and the state. This process is highly conflictive, and constantly influenced by the present context of structural poverty, ongoing abuses from institutions such as the police, and unfulfilled promises of the democratic transition. Furthermore, the presence of conservative sectors that justify and even vindicate the military dictatorship has constituted a permanent constraint that has governed the terms of the debate.

Theoretical debates and concepts

All over the world, societies are dealing with the legacies of massive violence, human rights violations, and terror orchestrated by the state. Heated debates have emerged within these societies between human rights activists, victims, academics, lawyers, and government officials on ‘how much to acknowledge, whether to punish, and how to recover’ (Minow 1998: 2). In many countries, especially in Latin America, human rights-oriented groups, victims and other oppositional actors have challenged the often restricted visions of governments on these issues. They have responded to official policies by turning to international law, publicizing names of offenders and the names of victims, asking for reparations and apologies, and creating monuments (Barahona de Brito et. al. 2001: 16; Hayner 2001: 22). In this way, ‘truth, justice and memory’ have become important fields of contention. Debates revolve around how far legal prosecution should go, and how a given period is to be remembered. In this context, major conflicts have arisen over the interpretation of recent history, and over attempts to shape the historical consciousness of a country (Beezley and Lorey 2002: xiv). These disputes can last for decades, as the case of Argentina shows. At the heart of these disputes lie the establishment of individual and collective responsibilities, and the ability to extract lessons from a violent episode to build a ‘better’ society.
The dilemmas societies face in the aftermath of violence have received a lot of attention from different theoretical perspectives. The scholarship on democratic transitions and consolidation has studied the subject as part of the discussion on the challenges that new democratic governments face in the aftermath of a dictatorship (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Diamond, Linz and Lipset 1989; Huntington 1991; Dominguez and Lowenthal 1996; Méndez, O'Donnell and Pinheiro 1999). The field of transitional justice has focussed more specifically on the range of measures adopted by new regimes to deal with the legacies of human rights violations, such as truth commissions, trials, and economic reparations (Herz 1982; Nino 1996; Méndez and Mascurriena 1998; Minow 1998; Teitel 2000; Barahona de Brito et. al. 2001; Hayner 2001; Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006). Both theoretical fields have generally privileged institutional politics and legislation and have paid special attention to the role of the state in processes of transitional justice.

Much of the early debate in the field of transitional justice in the 1990s evolved around the question of whether criminal prosecutions should take place for past human rights violations, or whether, on the contrary, trials should be limited or avoided for the sake of democratic stability. The debate at the time was strongly shaped by the experiences of Latin America and of Eastern Europe, where the transitions were to a large extent negotiated between elites and where the representatives of the previous regimes often remained powerful actors. In these contexts, official truth-telling was pushed forward as ‘a second best’ option (Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006: 3). Later, truth commissions were also promoted in their own right, as a mechanism that could achieve things other than criminal prosecutions. It was assumed that, more than trials, truth commissions could establish patterns of repression, and give a nuanced understanding of the period under study, including an analysis of what social structures made the repression possible in the first place. They were also invested with healing capacities, offering victims a space to tell their story (Hayner 2001: 134; Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006). Finally, scholars pointed to the fact that testifying about their experiences, and being heard, could provide seemingly powerless victims with a sense of their own agency (La Capra 1998: 71; Mertus 2003: 228; Sanford 2003: 72).

Over time, voices arose against the assumption that truth commissions could replace legal prosecutions. In a study on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Wilson (2001) criticizes the granting of amnesty for the perpetrators of crimes in exchange for testimony, and argues that the work of the commission did not automatically contribute to reconciliation. He suggests that the lack of retributive justice for the crimes committed during apartheid has undermined the rule of law in South Africa. A similar argument is also supported by Borneman (1997) in a comparative study on post-socialist Eastern European countries. He shows that many problems of un-governability and criminality in these countries can be traced back to the lack of retributive justice towards the crimes of the past, which has de-legitimized the rule of law. According to Borneman (1997: 7), ‘if the principles of the rule of law are not invoked and ritually reaffirmed, a society will be confronted with potentially endless cycles of violent retaliations’. It is in the dual process of punishing the culprits and redressing victims’ rights that ‘the political community is constituted in a moral

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2 See among others Huntington (1991), Zalaquett (1992) and Nino (1996) for an argument on why trials should be limited or even avoided for the sake of political stability. See among others Mignone et.al (1984) and Mendez and Mariezcurrena (1998) for the opposite argument that impunity disrupts democracy and prevents further consolidation.
community’. Punishment, then, is not merely an individual cause of the victims, but is part of a broader concern for the rule of law (Sanford 2003: 261).

The debate on transitional justice now seems to be moving beyond the ‘truth or justice’ dichotomy, looking more at truth and justice as complementary measures, both necessary to achieve some level of reconciliation. Furthermore, over the years transitional justice scholars and practitioners have started to acknowledge the importance of also looking at the ways in which transitional justice is implemented at the local level of the neighbourhood or the community. The mechanisms used in this context are often based on customary law, indigenous culture and traditions, and combine different elements of truth telling, justice, reparations and apology (Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006: 8–12). An important contribution in this context has come from a growing body of empirically-grounded studies conducted by anthropologists, sociologists and historians on how periods of extreme political violence have shaped social structures. These studies have focussed less on legal and institutional measures implemented at the state level, and more on how societies, local communities, groups and individuals have tried to give meaning to the past (Feitlowitz 1998; Roniger and Szajider 1999; Koonings and Kruijt 1999; Robben 2000; Groppo and Flier 2001; Lorey and Beezley 2002; Remijnse 2003; Sanford 2003; Theidon 2004; Dubois 2005).

Another theoretical field that has extensively explored the question of how societies give meaning to a violent past is that of the broad field of memory studies. The experience of the Holocaust and the Second World War have engendered an enormous body of scholarly reflections on this topic in Europe, and especially in Germany. This literature has pointed at the moral imperative to remember that is connected to the experience of the Holocaust. It has addressed philosophical and historiographical dilemmas such as the limits of representation of the Holocaust as well as the limits of comparability of this historical episode with other cases of totalitarianism and state-orchestrated terror, especially the Stalinist experience in the Soviet Union (Maier 1988; Friedlander 1992; La Capra 1998; Ricoeur 2000). At the heart of these discussions is the question of how to integrate an episode of massive violence and state-orchestrated terror into national history, making collective sense of it. Questions have been raised about the ‘abuses of memory’ (Todorov 1998) and the necessity to reflect critically on what a society should remember of its traumatic past. Studies on the post-communist experiences in Eastern Europe have pointed out that memory can also play a role in fomenting renewed wars and conflict (Hirsch 1995; Vujacic 1996; see also Barahona de Brito et. al. 2007: 332). The challenge then is to elaborate a memory that diminishes divisiveness and can have an ‘exemplary’ function (Todorov 1998).

Societies are constantly divided over the will to forget and the necessity to remember. In a study on memory in Chile, Wilde (2001) has coined the term ‘irruptions of memory’ to refer to periodic symbolic reminders of the military dictatorship that force Chileans to reconsider their past time and again. Various studies of Western Europe after the Second World War have shown how these societies have first gone through a long period of silence about the experience of the Holocaust (Rousso 1990; Van Vree 1995; Groppo 2001; Lvovich 2007). Sometimes a new generation for whom the memory is not an autobiographical, personally experienced one (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002: 45) can contribute to opening up the debate and raise new questions, as happened in West Germany in the 1960s (Koonz, 1994: 268). At the heart of these silences is often the difficult issue of individual and collective responsibilities (Groppo 2001: 31). In a comparative study between Germany, Italy and France after the Second World War, and Argentina after the dictatorship, Lvovich (2007: 115) observes that in
Argentina there was no period of silence, due largely to the persistent activism of the human rights movement. But Argentina was no exception when it came to elaborating what he calls ‘comfortable’ narratives in which the issue of civilian responsibilities was avoided. Similarly, in an essayistic study on how Argentine society has reflected upon its recent past, Vezzetti (2002) points to the lack of attention that has been paid to the role of civilians in the coming about and implementation of the military dictatorship. Outside Argentina the subject has received attention through the study of Baud (2001) on the role of civilians in the military government.

Within the wide range of studies on memory, one stream specifically concentrates on the social, political and cultural trajectories of the negotiation process that resulted in a particular monument or commemoration (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991: 377). Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1991) studied the process that led to the creation of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, as a means to understand how commemoration without consensus and pride is possible; Schwartz (1997) studied how the historical character of Abraham Lincoln was transformed through commemorative symbolism from a conservative symbol of the status quo during the Jim Crow era into the personification of racial justice and equality during the New Deal and the civil rights movement. This approach can also be seen in the series on the memory of the repression of the Southern Cone directed by Elisabeth Jelin. The series studies commemorations, monuments, memorials and territorial marks, archives, education and media and other vehicles of memory, unravelling the way they came about and developed over time, mostly in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil.

In Argentina, like in the other countries of the Southern Cone, a story of the struggles about the past is also the story of the human rights movement that emerged at the height of the repression, and continues to be the main referent on matters of the past. The human rights movement has received widespread attention in the literature on Argentina. Scholars who have studied the emergence of the human rights movement and its influence during the democratic transition have pointed to the inventiveness of the movement and its capacity to mobilize others in the resistance against the dictatorship (Veiga 1985; Sondereguer 1985; Leis 1989a; Brysk 1994; Jelin 1993). Some studies have focussed on the organizations of victims, especially the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, drawing attention to the way these organizations challenged gendered practices and notions, or to how the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have broadened their agenda to formulate a critique of neoliberalism (Guzman Bouvard 1994; Filc 1997; Arditti 1999; Navarro 2001; Borland 2006; Bonner 2007). Barahona de Brito (2001) has shown that the human rights movements that emerged in Uruguay, Chile, Brazil and Argentina displayed significant diversity in their capacity to influence the accountability process after the democratic transition. In comparison to the cases of Uruguay and Brazil, the Chilean and Argentine human rights movement showed far greater strength and were able to significantly influence the agenda of the transition. Similarly, in an even broader comparative analysis, Sikkink (2008: 2) argues that the movement has been an “exporter” of human rights tactics, ideas and experts’, and stands out

3 As will be discussed throughout this study, this lack of public debate on civilian responsibilities can not be seen outside the context of impunity towards those most directly implicated in acts of torture and disappearances.

for its many innovations. Others are more sceptical and have pointed out internal divisions within the movement and difficulties to move from oppositional tactics to more positive action after the transition to democracy (Corradi 1987; Brysk 1994; Jelin 1995; Taylor 1998).

This study draws upon these different theoretical strands. The insights from the literature on transitional justice will help us to better contextualize the Argentine case and to understand the institutional and political constraints and dilemmas that societies face in the aftermath of terror. The literature on (collective) memory will assist in unravelling the social and political process through which historical narratives come about and how they evolve over time. Finally, this study focuses on the role of civil society actors in confronting past violations, and how their attempts to influence the debate interact with official policies. Given this focus, a social movement perspective will prove particularly valuable for this research. It will help us to analyse the reasons behind the emergence and unfolding of these different societal initiatives pressing for truth, justice and memory, and provide us with tools to analyse their role in the public debates on the recent past. The literature on collective memory acknowledges the fact that memory is socially constructed and the result of competing visions of the past. But less attention is paid to how ‘agents of memory’ (Vinitsky-Seroussi 2002: 33) try – and sometimes manage – to impose their vision of how and what to remember. A social movement approach, with its focus on agency and social and political change, will help us to understand how agency, including strategic agency, has affected the contours of the collective memory process in Argentina.

Argentina is an interesting case because the Argentine human rights movement has been very creative and persistent, and has seemingly achieved some successes over time. Furthermore, compared to other Latin American countries, the Argentine state initially went relatively far in acknowledging the truth and prosecuting the culprits. The truth commission was the first one to be established on the continent, and the trial of the juntas is generally seen as a milestone outside Argentina. Sikkink and Booth Walling (2006: 301) even contend that the Argentine accountability process was instrumental in initiating what they call the ‘Justice Cascade – a rapid shift towards new norms and practices of providing more accountability for human rights violations’. The human rights movement played a crucial role in instigating these accountability measures. Later, these initial achievements were reversed, putting Argentina on the same footing as other Latin American countries where a trade-off took place between political stability and justice. Thus, when it comes to dealing with its legacy of past violations, Argentina is at once similar and different from its Latin American counterparts, making it an interesting case. In the following section, I will elaborate further on the main concepts that are used in this book, and discuss some of the most important insights drawn from both social movement theory and from the debates on transitional justice and collective memory that guide this study.

**Conceptualizing the struggle for truth, justice and memory as a social movement**

The social movement demanding ‘truth, justice and memory’ grew out of the historical human rights movement that emerged in opposition to the dictatorship. It started as a loose group of mostly victims and solidarity organizations that denounced the disappearances in unconventional ways, and developed into an internationally recognized human rights movement whose main goals were life, liberty and personal security (Brysk 1994: 7). Other actors participating in the movement are new organizations of victims that emerged after the transition, social and political organizations that identify with the demands of truth, justice
and memory, and engaged individuals such as journalists and intellectuals. Participants\(^5\) in the movement generally share a middle- or upper class background, but display significant heterogeneity in personal experiences, beliefs and ideological frameworks. This heterogeneity also finds expression in differences over strategies, goals and interpretations of the recent past. The binding element between these actors is the rejection of denial, impunity and silence towards the crimes of the recent past.

Social movements are a specific form of collective action. Tarrow (1998) and Della Porta and Diani (2006) explain what differentiates them from other forms of collective action, such as political parties or interest groups. Della Porta and Diani (2006: 23) identify three elements that characterize social movements. In the first place, they are involved in ‘conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents’. Secondly, they are linked by internal networks, and finally they share a distinct collective identity. This leads them to formulate the following definition: ‘We have a social movement dynamic going on when single episodes of collective action are perceived as components of a longer-lasting action, rather than discrete events; and when those who are engaged in them feel linked by ties of solidarity and of ideal communion with protagonists of other analogous mobilizations’ (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 23). These elements are also present in Tarrow’s (1998: 4) definition of social movements as: ‘collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities’.

A first distinctive element of social movements thus lies in the forms of collective action that characterize social movement activity. According to Tarrow (1998: 3) these actions are different from for instance political parties or interest groups, because they are contentious, meaning that they behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities. Their actions become contentious because they often advance new or unaccepted claims and lack regular access to institutions. Social movements, therefore, are always involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents. But these opponents can change over time. The contentious actions of the human rights movement in Argentina were first directed at the armed forces under the military regime, but shifted to the democratic governments after the transition to democracy. The fact that collective action of social movements is generally contentious, however, does not mean that they never use other forms of collective action, such as ‘lobbying, legal challenges, and public relations’ (Tarrow 1998: 5). Brysk (1994: 6) also points to the fact that ‘the protest wing of a social movement often works in tandem with others who exert pressure through institutional channels’. Although this combination can be observed within the Argentine human rights movement as well, as we will see, there were also periods during which both wings opposed each other rather than working together.

Another distinctive feature of social movements is that they are composed of what Della Porta and Diani identify as dense informal networks, or what Tarrow has divided into ‘common purpose’ and ‘sustained interaction’. According to Della Porta and Diani (2006: 21):

> A social movement process is in place to the extent that both individual and organized actors, while keeping their autonomy and independence, engage in sustained exchanges of resources in pursuit of common goals. The coordination of specific initiatives, the regulation of individuals actors’ conduct, and the definition of strategies all depend on permanent negotiations between

\(^5\) Following Della Porta and Diani (2006: 26) I chose to use the notion of participants instead of members, as a means to distinguish between social movements and social movement organizations.
the individuals and the organizations involved in collective action. No single organized actor, no matter how powerful, can claim to represent a movement as a whole.

In this context, Della Porta and Diani (2006: 25) make an explicit conceptual distinction between social movement organizations and social movements. Social movements are networks, therefore, they are fluid phenomena and can ‘either include formal organizations or not, depending on shifting circumstances’. This same fluidity can be observed in the Argentine human rights movement, where formal structures are absent and relations between participants in the movement constantly changed over time. Tarrow adds to this understanding the notion of sustainability. It is only when collective action against antagonists can become sustainable over time, through the mobilization of common purposes – often based on class interests or common or overlapping interests and values, collective identities and identifiable challenges, that one can speak of a social movement.

Finally, a last basic property of social movements, which importantly contributes to the sustainability of a movement, is the sharing of a distinct collective identity and what Tarrow identifies as ‘social solidarity’. According to Della Porta and Diani (2006: 21), ‘a social movement process is in place only when collective identities develop, which go beyond specific events and initiatives’. Tarrow (1998: 6) recalls the importance of ‘more deep-rooted feelings of solidarity and identity’ that are necessary to mobilize people for a common goal. Thus, collective identity is a condition for collective action to develop into a movement. Without the presence of such a collective identity, contentious forms of collective action such as riots and short outbursts of protest remain just that. Della Porta and Diani (2006: 21-2) state in this context: ‘Within social movements, membership criteria are extremely unstable and ultimately dependent on mutual recognition between actors; the activity of boundary definition, i.e. of defining who is and who is not part of the network, indeed plays a central role in the emergence and shaping of collective action’. But collective identity is also strengthened through social movement activity; experiences of social protest stimulate feelings of belonging and shared history.

Sharing a collective identity does not mean that there is homogeneity among the actors involved in a social movements dynamic. On the contrary, social movements generally show high levels of heterogeneity. In this context, Jelin (quoted in Escobar et. al. 1992: 6) warns us that social movements are ‘always the objects constructed by the researcher, which do not necessarily coincide with the empirical form of collective action. Seen from the outside, they may present a certain degree of unity, but internally they are always heterogeneous, diverse’. In the Argentine human rights movement, the range of participants varies from institutionalized human rights organizations to loose groups of people that deliberately chose for an informal organizational structure. In general, ideological differences, class, gender, ethnicity, but also variations in levels of experience among individuals, including generational differences, as well as in levels of institutionalization among the organizations involved might all be present within a social movement.

In social movement scholarship, the heterogeneity of social movements is acknowledged, but there is still a strong tendency to establish clear-cut boundaries between insurgents and authorities, dissidents or challengers and state actors. Auyero (2007: 20) reminds us that reality tends to be more complex and also more ambiguous. Differences can emerge as much within the same movement, as between movements and their opponents. Furthermore, informal internal hierarchies can develop over time, especially when a movement is made
up of organizations and societal actors who have a longer history of participation within the movement than others. Paying some attention to these hierarchies can also shed a different light on the frequently returning vision of ‘the popular’ or ‘the subaltern’, in opposition to ‘the state’, or ‘the dominant groups’. This is not, however, to minimize the broader unequal power relations in which these social movement actors operate. As Van den Hombergh (2004: 56) emphasizes, there are important differences in power and room for manoeuvre between high-level political and economic institutions and societal actors that have reduced access to institutional channels or none at all.

Taking into account the political context
The Argentine human rights movement is part of a new generation of social movements that acquired visibility in Latin America from the 1970s onwards, and that some have characterized as ‘new social movements’ (Escobar et. al. 1992) and others as ‘identity politics’ (Hale 1997). While many social movement scholars have repeatedly emphasized the continuities between old and new social movements, there is a general consensus that the 1970s and 80s marked a shift in forms of collective action. In opposition to ‘old’ social movements, like the peasant or workers movements, new social movements are not class-based but identity-based. Examples of new social movements are the women’s movement, the peace movement, environmentalist movements and human rights movements. They tend to be non-hierarchical, decentralized, open, spontaneous and participatory, and autonomous from the state (Foweraker 1995: 43). There are high levels of women participation in these movements (Jelin 1994). Contrary to old class-based movements, they go beyond the search for material gain to challenge the very notions of politics and society themselves (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 9). In politicizing issues that were not conceived as such, new social movements challenge the arena of formal politics to, in Dagnino’s (1998: 57) words, ‘enlarge its own boundaries and broaden its agenda’. In doing so, they also expand the boundaries of citizenship, political representation and participation, and therefore of democracy itself (Hale 1997: 58; Alvarez et. al 1998: 2).

Much of the new social movements literature in Latin America has focussed on the constitution of collective identities through movement activism, and the ways in which social movements have challenged existing notions of rights and citizenship. But less attention has been paid to the ways in which social movements are affected by their political and social environment. Yet, social movements do not operate in a vacuum. The political context is crucial to understanding why a movement has emerged and how it has evolved over time. The political context and its role in social movement dynamics has received special attention in the ‘political process approach’ (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982). Scholars of this school of thought have pointed to the central importance of the political context in explaining the success and failure of social movements. Social movements often have a limited existence in time and Tarrow (1998: 7) has coined the term of ‘cycles of contention’ to grasp this dynamic character of social movements. In trying to explain why a social movement emerges or disappears, he attributes a central role to changes in the political context. He identifies both ‘political constraints’ and ‘political opportunities’ that influence the emergence and development of a movement. Political opportunities are ‘consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national – dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics’. Political constraints refer to ‘factors – like repression, but also like authorities’ capacities to present a solid front to insurgents – that discourage
contention' (Tarrow 1998: 19-20). The emergence and success of a social movement depends on a group's ability to take advantage of the situation created by a broadening of political opportunities to bring forward its demands.

Bringing back the political context into the analysis has deepened our understanding of what elements influence the 'repertoires of contention' (Tilly 1986). Repertoires of contention can be non-institutional – strikes, marches, barricades, but also institutional, such as lobbying and negotiation. The degree of political openness or closure will strongly determine the means of claim-making applied. In a context in which there is little room for negotiation with official authorities, social movements will necessarily operate outside institutional channels and use protest and other non-conventional means such as symbolic actions to make their claims. In an extremely repressive context, the only means through which organizations and individuals can resist are often mostly symbolic. A change in political context might bring forward the need to adapt the means of claim-making. In the case of Argentina, the return of democracy clearly set a new agenda for the human rights movement, confronting its participants with the need to move from a tactic of persuasion to one of bargaining (Brysk 1994: 20).

Social movements always emerge and develop in relation to other political actors and, particularly, in relation to the state. Thus we need to shift our attention towards 'interactions between new and traditional actors and between less conventional forms of action and institutionalized systems of interest representation' (Della Porta and Diani's 2006: 17). Such a focus on interactions will also be adopted in this study. It permits us to observe that institutional politics and movement actions are not separate domains but intertwined. 'State institutions and political parties', Goldstone (2003:2) states 'are interpenetrated by social movements, often developing out of movements, in response to movements, or in close association with movements'. Such a perspective also draws attention to the fact that political actors are not static but dynamic and their political position can shift over time. Groups and individuals who engage in protest may also, later in time, work for political parties, run for office, or occupy government posts (Auyero 2007: 20).

The state furthermore, is heterogeneous and involves 'multiple players and parties' (Goldstone 2003: 20). State-social movements relations, then, are far more varied than is often assumed. A state can respond to social movement activity with repression but can also embrace movements and seek their integration into party politics, or search for an ongoing alliance with social movements. Furthermore, social movements that have managed to achieve high levels of influence in institutional politics can still continue to practice contentious politics to achieve their goals (Goldstone 2003: 20-4). These insights will prove particularly relevant to understand the more recent developments in Argentina after the election of Kirchner. In Argentina both scholars and social movement activists have tended

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6 The state has two different dimensions, one abstract and one tangible. Following McSherry (1997: 9-10), 'in its most abstract sense, the state represents the organization and concentration of political power and the apparatus of rule in any society. Along with its function as guarantor of order, the state also exerts some degree of control over the distribution of economic goods in society. It controls the means of coercion and the means of taxation'. On a second, more tangible level, the state 'includes the constellation of bureaucratic institutions and apparatuses, including executive, legislative, and judicial branches, the civil bureaucracy, public and semi-public corporations, the legal system, and the coercive forces including the armed forces and the police (and in the case of Argentina, Gendarmeria and Prefectura). The state then, includes the permanent bureaucracies, which do not change with the advent of new elected governments'.

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to approach the relation between state and social movements from a binary logic in which the state is principally seen as a homogeneous block. This has to a certain extent obscured the existence of linkages between the state and the human rights movement or acknowledged them while interpreting them as a sign of cooptation.

**Framing as a means to induce social and political change**

This study aims to analyse how the Argentine human rights movement has evolved over time, in a dynamic interaction with its political and social environment. While, as discussed in the previous paragraph, social movements are constantly affected by their environment, they also affect their environment. Social movements generally try to induce social and political change at two different levels. In the first place, according to Della Porta and Diani (2006: 229), ‘all social movements tend to make demands on the political system’. They seek to influence policy making, as well as create procedural political changes, influencing the way the political system functions as a whole: in its institutional and formal procedures, its configuration of power, its elite recruitment. A second level at which social movements try to induce change is that of the production of meaning. Movements aim at cultural transformations that will lead to more structural changes. Movements seek to ‘influence bystanders, spreading their own conception of the world, and they struggle to have new identities recognized’ (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 232).

Thus, social movements are constantly involved in ‘meaning work’ that is, in the struggle over the production of ideas (Snow and Benford 1992: 136). This meaning work has also been conceptualized as ‘framing work’, referring to the shaping of grievances into broader and more resonant claims (Tarrow 1998: 21). The concept of the frame has been used to identify the general, standardized, predefined structure which allows recognition of the world, that guides perception, allowing one to build defined expectations about what is to happen, that is to make sense of one’s reality (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 74). Frames are different from ideology in that they do not require a whole coherent set of integrated principles and assumptions, as is the case with ideology⁷, but provide, instead, ‘a key to make sense of the world’, in the words of Della Porta and Diani (2006: 79). In many cases, frames emerge from ideologies, while at the same time frames can also affect ideologies. Snow and Benford (1992: 136) have coined the concept of ‘collective action frames’ to refer specifically to the product of the framing work of social movements. Collective action frames ‘underscore and embellish the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable’ (Snow and Benford 1992: 137).

Often the same movement can have multiple, loose frames rather than a dominant one (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 74-8). But, as Tate (2007) points out in her study on human rights activism in Colombia, the same frame – for example the human rights frame – can be used by different social actors to advance different ideological projects. Thus, according to Tate (2007: 4), while all human rights professionals in Colombia share a focus on protecting lives, ‘their ideas of which human lives to give priority and how best to achieve their protection result from widely divergent views on the nature of power, on understandings of the role of the state, and on the origin and possible resolution of the Colombian conflict’.

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⁷ Ideology is conceived here as a ‘relatively stable and coherent set of values, beliefs, and goals associated with a movement or a broader, encompassing social entity […] assumed to provide the rationale for defending or challenging various social arrangements and conditions’ (Snow quoted in Della Porta and Diani 2006: 66).
We will see that this same diversity is to be found in the Argentine context among actors struggling for truth, justice and memory. While all aim at remembering the crimes committed during the dictatorship and punishing the culprits, and use a similar frame which could be defined as the ‘memory against forgetting’ frame, they are often motivated by very different projects. Dagnino’s (2004: 58) notion of ‘political projects’ will be useful in this context. It refers to ‘those sets of beliefs, interests, conceptions of the world and representations of what life in society should be that guide the political action of different subjects and play a central role in the struggle to build hegemony’. It will help us to analyse the ‘multi-positioned interests and identities’ (van den Hombergh 2004: 42) of the actors mobilizing around the same issues and using similar frames, and will help us to understand some of the internal conflicts that have arisen in this context.

Social movements organizers and participants are not the only ones engaged in framing work. As Tarrow (1998: 22) reminds us, ‘in addition to building on inherited cultural understandings, they compete with the media, which transmit messages that movements must attempt to shape and influence’. Furthermore, ‘states are also constantly framing issues, both in order to gain support for their policies and to contest the meanings placed in public space by movements’. Additionally, frames do not develop in isolation but rather in a dynamic interaction with other signifying agents. Movements then, are, according to Snow and Benford (1992: 136) ‘functioning in part as signifying agents that often are deeply embroiled, along with the media, local governments and the state, in what has been referred to aptly as the “politics of signification”’. Or, in Tarrow’s (1998: 22) words, ‘the struggle between states and movements takes place not only on the streets but in contests over meaning’. In this context, Baud and Rutten (2004: 5) speak of a ‘social dynamics of framing’ which involves both the mobilization of support and alliances, and confrontation with opponents. Framing, they write, is about ‘ideas forged in dialogue’ (Milner quoted in Baud and Rutte 2004: 5) and it includes the ‘interactive processes of talk, persuasion, arguing, contestation, interpersonal influence, subtle rhetoric posturing, outright marketing that modify – indeed continually modify – the contents of interpretative frames’ (Oliver and Johnson quoted in Baud and Rutte 2004: 5).

These social dynamics of framing will occupy a central place in this study. I will analyse the contents of the meaning work of the human rights movement, how it was carried out, in what ways it has influenced public interpretations of the past and how to deal with it, and how this has evolved over time. These questions will be answered by combining an analysis of cultural interpretations, values and beliefs, with a focus on the more concrete proposals to influence official policies and legislation on matters of the recent past. The capacity of the human rights movement to influence public interpretations will be traced in three different ways. In the first place, changes in public policy and legislation, and in procedural changes in the political system that occurred at the initiative of the movement will serve as a means to assess their impact. Secondly, I will look at the extent to which new actors have joined the movement over time and adopted the same interpretative frame. Finally, I will look at how the various collective action frames of the movement get a hold on public opinion and manage to influence the public debate. The mainstream media (newspapers, television, radio),

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8 In this context it is important to clarify that attempts by new actors to change these frames should not necessarily be seen as a failure, because interpretative frames are dynamic and constantly changing. The issue, however, will be to what extent they initially join the movement identifying with the basic interpretative frame that binds the movement together.
which produce frames, but also reproduce dominant political frames and collective action frames, will form a useful platform for identifying some of these changes.

**Collective memory and its politics**

Memory, following Stern (2004: 105), ‘is the meaning we attach to experience, not simply recall of the events and emotions of that experience’. It is also above all a social process. Individual memories are constantly affected by our social environment (Zerubavel 1996: 283).

In Auyero’s (2002: 154-5) words: ‘The relational setting in which actors are located affects the depth, tone and the very facts of their memories. Memory is thus socially constructed and inter-subjectively structured’. What individuals remember is largely determined by what the social group they are part of considers ‘memorable’ and how this should be remembered (Burke 1989: 98). The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs was the first to point out the collective dimension of memory in the 1920s. In his two major works on memory, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* and *La mémoire collective*, he argued that individual memories were always socially embedded, and that it is from collective memory frameworks that individuals construct what they think are personal or individual memories. He focussed on the family, religion and the nation to show how each of these categories conditions the ways in which memory is activated at the individual level. Collective frameworks of memory are not composed of a combination of individual memories, but of the instruments used by collective memory to recompose an image of the past adapted to the dominant ways of thinking of a society at different periods in time. Thus, from Halbwachs’ perspective, nobody remembers alone, and memories do not exist outside these collective memory frameworks (Halbwachs 1925: xi; see also Crane 1997: 1376; Ricoeur 2000: 146-51).

Halbwachs has been criticized for not leaving enough room for individual remembering in his theory, and for suggesting that something like a collective memory would exist outside people’s minds, as a structural and structuring framework (Crane 1997; Klein 2000: 130). But his insights into the socially constructed character of memory and on the importance of the collective dimensions of memory have been highly influential in the study of memory. Collective memory will be taken here as consisting of ‘past reminiscences that link given groups of people for whom the remembered events are important, that is, the events remain significant to them later on’ (Osiel 1997: 18). In this context, it is important to recall that, following Zerubavel (1996: 293-4):

> The collective memory of a mnemonic community is quite different from the sum total of the personal recollections of its various individual members, as it includes only those that are commonly shared by all of them (in the same way that public opinion, for example, is more than the mere aggregate of individuals’ personal opinions). It thus involves the integration of various different personal pasts into a single common past that all members of a particular community come to remember collectively.

Sometimes, collective memory is also referred to as social memory, preferred for being less static and leaving more room to the individual (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 79), or as public memory and historical memory (Aguilar 2002: 6). In this research, I will use the concept of collective memory interchangeably with social memory and public memory.

Collective memory has direct implications for the constitution of social ties within and among groups. It is ‘the way a group of people maintain a shared identity through the
course of their lifetimes’ (Boyarin 1994: 23-4). At the same time, it should not be taken as a reified entity that stands above and separated from individuals, but rather as ‘traces left by events that have affected the course of history of the groups involved, and who have the capacity to put on the scenery these common memories through public rites, celebrations and commemorations’ (Jelin 2002a: 22). This points to the fact that collective memory always results from a selection process that involves remembering some things and forgetting others (Jelin 2002a: 29). This selection process, furthermore, is to a great extent determined by the needs of the present. Schwartz (1997: 470) even states that collective memory always reflects the concerns of the present, and it vanishes when it ceases to be relevant to current experience. Similarly, Collins (2006: 94) insists on the fact that ‘people produce the past through a dynamic engagement with the present (and even the future)’. Thus, memory is essentially a process that belongs to the present, and in order to understand the process through which collective memory is produced, it is necessary to also focus on the current experiences, interests and needs of the different actors involved in this process.

The process through which national collective memory comes about is often a conflictive one. Zerubavel (1996: 296) has coined the term ‘mnemonic battles’ to refer to the conflicts that arise over the contents of collective memory. These mnemonic battles are typically fought in the public arena and range from the ‘correct’ way to interpret the past to what ought to be collectively remembered in the first place. These ‘mnemonic battles’ usually involve a wide range of individual and collective actors, from state leaders and institutions, to the media, academia, religious or political leaders and institutions, and other civil society actors. These agents of memory also display different relations to the recent past: for some, memory is an autobiographical experience, whereas others did not live through the experience themselves. They are often also differently located within social structures: gender, class and power relations all affect their position in the negotiation process (Gillis 1994: 3). The existence of different visions over the past produce ‘struggles to occupy a hegemonic space in narrating the past of a society’, in the words of Lorenz (2002: 55). Different groups aim at ‘officialising’ or ‘institutionalizing’ their narrative of the past (Jelin 2002a: 36).

The notion of mnemonic battles already suggests that, using Stern’s (2004: 124-5) words ‘the making of collective memory is a highly political process’. The relationship between memory and politics is, according to Stern, a reciprocal one: ‘Political upheaval and attendant atrocities generate memory struggles; politics and power, in turn, shape memory’s playing field’. Power, then, becomes an important category of analysis for understanding how some narratives manage to displace others and become hegemonic (Jelin 2002a: 40). In this context, Wagner-Pacifici (1996: 307) states that reflecting on memory is also a way of thinking about power relations. Taylor (1994: 200) is even more explicit and states that memory is ‘a dynamic political category’ and ‘a fact of power’. What is remembered depends on who is in power. She thus argues that ‘memory as constituted is exclusionary: it omits what hierarchy does not recognize. Remembering, then, is also a process of forgetting. It is a process of simultaneously constituting some subjectivities and doing violence to others’. This situation leads to competing memories, each group developing a politics of the past, aimed at strengthening its own foundations while debilitating opposed or competing groups (Oberti and Pittaluga 2006: 30). The more power a group, individual or institution has, the more possibilities it has to make its vision of the past hegemonic.

In these struggles over national collective memory, the state is in a privileged position to impose its narrative of the past, converting it into ‘the official story’. In the process of nation
building that took place in the Occidental world – including Latin America – during the nineteenth century, states have used their power to bring unity where there was diversity, with the political purpose of building a national identity. In this process, national education, patriotic symbols, monuments and commemorations were important instruments (Jelin 2002a: 40). Official histories have also served to reinforce the social order. In this context, Gillis (1994: 9-10) observes how, through remembering some actors and forgetting others, the commemorations in the nineteenth century served exactly this purpose. According to Gillis (1994: 10), 'workers, racial minorities, young people and women gained admission to national memories at an even slower pace than they were admitted to national representative and educational institutions'. In the context of an authoritarian state, public space becomes dominated by one single political narrative that generally identifies clear enemies and foes, and serves to legitimize the regime in place. Explicit censorship and other forms of repression of civil and political liberties leave little room for counter-narratives (Jelin 2002a: 42).

Attempts from the state, either in an authoritarian or a democratic context, to impose one dominant interpretation of the past have often been strongly contested, giving way to counter-memories. Professional historians, who have often been active fomenters of an 'official history', have also at times played an important role in deconstructing these official versions of the past and shedding light on those aspects that have been omitted in official history. The counter-memories of those who have been erased from public memory have in fact often proved surprisingly resilient. In a context of authoritarianism, these alternative memories become subterraneous, prohibited and clandestine. But when this period of authoritarianism ends, and democratic space opens up, these subterraneous memories emerge or re-emerge, and find their way into public space, giving way to important struggles for their legitimacy and recognition into national memory (Jelin 2002a: 42). More in general, subaltern memories have often led to the development of important resistance movements and, in the process, memory itself has been constructed, memory being strategically mobilized for the purposes of collective action. Thus, in an article on the black communities of the Colombian Pacific, Hoffmann (2002) shows how the retrieval of memory has become a major factor in the struggles against discrimination and domination. Similarly, in Guatemala, the indigenous leadership of the Pan-Maya movement has actively sought to make visible a history that had been suppressed by the dominant class but that indigenous peoples had covertly kept alive, the retrieval of memory thus becoming an important tool for empowerment (Eckstein and Wickham-Croley 2003: 24-5).

The acknowledgement of the existence of mnemonic battles that oppose groups that interact on the basis of unequal power relations should not obscure the fact that neither the state and the dominant classes, nor the subaltern constitute homogeneous entities. Those groups promoting counter memories are often divided and fragmented (Oberti and Pittaluga 2006: 28-9), and the state does not necessarily act as a homogeneous entity either, especially not in a democratic system (Jelin 2002a: 44). Theidon (2004: 144) argues against the tendency to homogenize 'the popular' in a binary logic that opposes 'popular memory' to 'official memory', and recalls that to 'homogenize “the popular” is erase the fact that one can be simultaneously oppositional and hegemonic in a given context'. Similarly, Robin Wagner-Pacifici (1996: 308) draws attention to the problematic aspects of the 'alleged polarity of vernacular and official voices and versions'. These insights are particularly useful to understand some of the developments in the Argentine context. Here we will see that human rights organizations that arose in opposition to the military dictatorship, and
especially the organizations of victims, were able to build a certain hegemony within the broader movement struggling for truth, justice and memory that developed over time. Their moral leadership and their condition of victims of the repression were powerful legitimizing elements. However, this hegemonic position within the movement was also contested and challenged by other agents of memory.

**Mnemonic battles over a 'difficult past'**

The struggles over the past acquire particular intensity when they concern a great historical trauma of national dimensions, as was the case for the military dictatorship in Argentina, because they raise expectations about the possibility to implement a new moral and political order. Moments of institutional rupture and conflict force a society to revise its societal contract, and at the same time offer an opportunity to rebuild a national identity on a different basis (Groppo 2001: 25). The disputes over the meaning of the past in the aftermath of a period of authoritarianism are also very much about what kind of society one is aiming for. Through the elaboration of narratives about the recent past, the actors involved in these disputes are also expressing their political projects and expectations for the future (Jelin 2002a: 43). The conflicts that arise in this context, then, are as much about how to remember the recent past as about the state model or project that these different groups want to promote (Jelin 2002b: 5). Memory, truth and justice almost seem to merge as the production of meanings over the past focuses exclusively on investigating the facts of the repression, on validating the experiences of the victims, and on establishing who were the culprits (Jelin 2002a: 43).10 Uncovering the truth and determining responsibilities become the way through which a collective understanding of the past is created.

In the countries of the Southern Cone, the various human rights movements that emerged in resistance to the dictatorships were among the principal actors promoting these demands for truth and justice. But the voices of those who had supported and even promoted the military regimes continued to challenge the voices of the victims and to question the legitimacy of their demands. The consequence was that in these countries, a scenery emerged in which opposed visions about how to interpret and deal with the recent past clashed and confronted each other in public space. This scenery has often been conceptualized in terms of a dichotomy of memory against forgetting, in which one sector struggles to keep the past alive whereas another sector strives to close the subject. Stern (2004: xxvii) has questioned this dichotomy for considering it too narrow and too restrictive. In his study on Chile, he explicitly distances himself from this dichotomy, and pleads for thinking in terms of a process of competing selective remembrances. Nevertheless, I still consider that the terms of ‘memory’ versus ‘oblivion’ are useful to identify the two broadly defined and heterogeneous camps that have emerged within the Argentine context. Those interpretations of the past that deny the very essence of the crimes committed, can be considered functional to oblivion. These facts have been acknowledged in the report of the truth commission, in the trial of

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9 The concept of ‘difficult past’ is borrowed from Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1991: 379) and refers to ‘a painful moment in society, such as a military defeat or an era of domestic oppression’.  
10 For a critical discussion of the complex relation between justice and collective memory, see Osiel’s (1997) insightful *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory and the Law*. For a discussion of the relation between history writing and the law, partially based on Osiel, see also Ricoeur 2000: 413-436. Finally, for insights into concrete cases of juridical prosecution and collective memory, see the case of the trial against Klaus Barbie in Rousso 1994: 239-248.
the juntas and the subsequent truth trials and criminal trials, and will be taken here as a basis for collective remembrance. Those who will be identified as ‘agents of oblivion’, then, are the groups and individuals who deny that the crimes committed were part of a systematic plan orchestrated by the state to eliminate political opponents. This discursive denial of the facts is also accompanied by explicit and systematic attempts to close the subject, to bury any evidence of the crimes committed, which justifies the use of the term ‘agents’. The ‘agents of memory’, on the other hand are those who share a rejection of state terrorism and the conviction that these facts need to be remembered for future generations, and who actively seek to achieve this.

Agents of memory are motivated by the conviction that there is a moral imperative to remember the facts of violence and the victims, a moral and ethical obligation that is often referred to as the *devoir de mémoire*, the duty to remember. Ricoeur (2000: 106) has pointed to the fact that the imperative to remember always accompanies the mandate not to forget, an obligation that can easily become a burden. Thus he states: ‘To say “you will remember”, is also to say “you will not forget”. It could even be so that the duty to remember constitutes simultaneously the height of good use and of abuse in the exercise of memory’. The obligation to remember, then, can lead to a constant repetition of the same events. In a critical essay on ‘the abuses of memory’, Todorov (1998) has coined the term ‘literal memory’ to refer to this kind of repetitive and obsessive memory as opposed to the notion of ‘exemplary memory’. The expression of ‘literal memory’ highlights a difficulty in processing the memories of the past, in ‘working them through’ and in making a critical selection of what should be remembered and what not in order to construct a better future – a dimension represented in the notion of ‘exemplary memory’. The exemplary memory is oriented towards the future, and extracts from traumatic memories those elements that have an exemplary value, that permit generalizations and lessons for the future. It contains a critical dimension, as a well as a universalizing one, and goes against memories that focus exclusively on group identities. Jelin (2002a: 58) points to the fact that it implies double work: ‘On the one hand, to overcome the pain caused by the memory and to manage to marginalize it so that it will not invade life; on the other hand – and here we step out of the personal and private area to move to the public sphere – learn from it, derive from it lessons that can become principles of action for the present’. Thus, according to Todorov (1998), it is only when working on a critical elaboration of the memories of the past, that they can be useful for society in the present and the future.

However, for those who experienced terror and loss in person, the imperative to remember often constitutes an intrinsic part of their lives. This existential dimension of memory struggles is one of the reasons why they cannot be reduced to a matter of politics alone. In this context Stern (2004: 128-9) rightfully observes that ‘paradoxically, what gives memory struggles about times of great human rupture and trauma such forcefulness – and potential to influence political legitimacy and alignments – is precisely the inability to reduce memory to a mere political instrument or strategy’. Memory in such a context is not simply political, but also moral and existential. Reflecting on memory struggles in Chile, he observes that it was in the first place indignation with the moral atrocities committed by the Pinochet regime that moved people to act and align themselves behind the human rights movement. The human rights language was able to capture this moral dimension of the struggle, and to override mere calculation of political advantage and disadvantage, or regime sympathy versus regime opposition. We will see that this was also the case in Argentina. At the same time,
memory was also existential, in the sense that people were themselves confronted with the experience or witnessing of atrocity. Again the experience of Chile is very similar to that of Argentina. In this context Stern (2004: 129) writes: ‘It was the existential aspect of memory that generated passion and persistence in the face of fear and adversity. […] For some survivors, relatives of victims, and witnesses, memory became an obligation and a condition of existence in the world, if one were to remain true and loyal to the self, to loved ones, or to friends and comrades’.

In the confrontational scenery that often emerges in post-authoritarian contexts, the newly-elected government and other state institutions such as the judiciary can play an important role in channelling the different interests that compete over the significance of memory and establish a new political and moral order. The instigation of truth commissions and trials, official statements, or the promotion of commemorations are all means by which the new democratic state can establish a break with the past. In the democratic context that emerges, societal actors will try to influence official policies and state institutions so as to institutionalize their demands for memory, truth and justice. But the state generally plays a more ambiguous role. Even when the executive feels a need to mark a break with the previous political order, this will not necessarily be done in the most absolute terms often requested by victims and human rights groups. The new governments are often constrained by the still powerful actors of the previous regime, as well as by the need to balance different political interests. Furthermore, in many cases the democratic state shows continuities with the previous regime,11 which makes it even less pre-disposed to go as far as societal agents of memory would want it to go. Often this leads to a trade-off between truth and justice, or to very limited trials. It can even lead to a retraction of the state from matters of the past altogether. The struggles to construct a memory of the recent experiences of terror then become confined to the societal arena.

When this happens, what are the consequences for the elaboration of a collective memory of the recent past? According to Jelin (2002a: 61) when the struggles to construct a memory of the repression are limited to the societal arena, there exists a risk that it enhances the conflictive character of the past. To what extent has the absence of the state on matters of the past, or its active role as an ‘agent of oblivion’ contributed to the conflictive character of the recent past in Argentina? Has it enhanced divisiveness, as Jelin contends? Reflecting on the societal process of remembering in Argentina, Robben (2005: 358) writes: ‘Even memorials,

11 In this context McSherry (1997: 10) points to the relevance of analytically distinguishing the state from the government and from a regime. For a definition of the state, see note 6. A regime is the system by which political functions are carried out, and the regime may extend over different governments. The government is, in McSherry’s (1997: 10) words, ‘a set of particular elected officials and/or a governing set of incumbents, especially in the executive branch’. The analytical distinction between these three terms enables us to better understand some of the obstacles that arise to overcoming experiences of authoritarianism. In many Latin American countries, after the democratic transitions ‘democratic governments have been merged with undemocratic states, in which the armed forces are still politically autonomous, parallel military structures of power still exist, and civilian branches of the state (Congress, the courts) are still subject to military surveillance and control. In many cases, military institutions have implanted guardian structures with which to limit the exercise of civil and political rights and contain the powers of civilian government’. In Argentina, although the armed forces suffered from a serious backlash in the last year of the regime as a consequence of the economic failure and the defeat in the Malvinas War, they were still left with enough power after the transition to continue to pressure and influence the democratic governments.
monuments and commemorations, which have played a significant role in mourning the Holocaust, have in Argentina increased rather than lessened divisiveness. How can these high levels of conflict over the matters of the past – not only between those who promote oblivion and those sectors who want to remember – but especially within this last group, be explained? To what extent does this have to do with the highly politicized character of the historical events to be remembered, or with the role played by official institutions? To what extent have the internal political and ideological differences among the victims and human rights groups, the most active agents of memory in Argentina, contributed to this divisiveness? These are questions that will be explored throughout this book.

Research choices: time frame, geographical focus, cases and methodology

This research is about the various ‘official and unofficial attempts to deal with the legacy of past violations’ (Sieder 2001: 162) that have unfolded in Argentina since the democratic transition in 1983. These include initiatives to disclose the facts of the repression, attempts to prosecute alleged perpetrators of past human rights violations, and the numerous initiatives to foment a collective memory of the period. The emphasis lies on the unofficial initiatives and how they have interacted with official attempts to deal with the past. Through a historical analysis of these interactions, and the dilemmas that emerged in this context, the research aims to gain insights into the ways in which Argentine society has given meaning to the period of the military dictatorship. It is assumed that an analysis of the political process of how these ‘politics of memory’ unfolded will also provide us with some answers to the question why the recent past has continued to be so topical in Argentina.

The point of entry to the study is the struggle of human rights organizations, victims of the dictatorship, and other social and political groups that demand truth, justice and memory, with a special focus on public memory initiatives. The research will address the following key analytical question: how has the struggle for truth, justice and memory of the Argentine human rights movement evolved over time in a dynamic interaction with its social and political environment? The research is organized around two main lines of inquiry. The first is oriented towards analysing the agents of memory, who they were, what motivated them, what their goals were, their strategies and their ‘political projects’ (Dagnino 2004: 58). The second line of inquiry is concerned with how they interacted with their political and social environment, how they were influenced by it but also how they managed to transform it. In general terms, the study aims at connecting the more subjective process by which ‘culture and cultural meaning are produced’ (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991: 377), with concrete and down-to-earth politics involving political institutions, legislation, and (state) power. This connection is all the more important since in Argentina public memory initiatives were never entirely detached from the very concrete and urgent need to secure human rights and to deepen the quality of democracy. Indeed, throughout the research it will become increasingly evident that debates about the past are an integral part of the discussion on how to organize society in the present.

Although this research draws on insights from history, anthropology, sociology and political science, it can perhaps best be characterized as being situated at the point where anthropology and history intersect. In the first place, it is an exercise in what Silverman and Gulliver (1996: 150) have called ‘an anthropology of history’. The concern is ‘with what people
know and remember about their past, how and why, how people make sense of the past and relate to it in the present, and how people's perceptions and understandings of their past are a retrospective product of their present’. This is very similar to what Giordano (1996: 99) calls the ‘actualized history’ that constitutes the main interest of anthropologists concerned with history. He defines this ‘actualized history’ as ‘a past that is more or less intentionally “mobilized” in the present’. More precisely, my concern here is primarily with public attempts to ‘mobilize’ the past in the present, rather than with people’s private memories.

Secondly, this work combines anthropology and history by proposing to historicize the social dynamics that are the object of this study. I am concerned with ‘how political and economic forces structure the micro-politics of cultural interaction and how actors react to and influence the course of large-scale processes’ (Driessen 1996: 76). Methodologically, this requires an approach in which the focus lies on particular cases – consisting of characters, events, or situations – that are ‘important not because they are representative, but because they show a process or a problem in particularly clear relief’ (Zusman quoted in Auyero 2007: 24). Thus it requires a combination of the anthropological concern with the small-scale level ‘where the people live and interact and where they experience both change and continuity, trying to make sense of what they encounter and deciding what to do’ (Silverman and Gulliver 1996: 151), and of the more traditional approach to history that is concerned with concrete time and facts (Åsa Boholm 1996: 34; Giordano 1996: 99).

This study focuses on the period that runs from the democratic transition in 1983 until 2006, when I did my last fieldwork. However, the centre of gravity of the study and especially the discussion of the case studies, lies in the period from 1996 to 2006. This choice was made after observing that the twentieth anniversary of the coup celebrated in 1996 constituted an important turning point in the struggles about the past. New actors and new debates emerged, and important advances were made in the search for justice. The subject became installed in public opinion and public attention for the recent past has only increased since then. Yet, these developments from the mid-1990s onwards cannot be understood without taking into account developments that occurred in the years before. The importance of previous developments is not always acknowledged in public comments and reflections on the memory process in Argentina. At times there is an implicit suggestion that memory struggles only started in 1996. The following metaphor used by one of my interviewees will prove helpful in overcoming such limited perspectives: ‘More than a coming up of memory I would speak of a river of which the mass of water starts to increase, sometimes slowly, but that towards the 1990s becomes much more vigorous’. Therefore, in this research I will depart from the general consensus that important changes did take place from 1996 onwards, but I will also try to go beyond existing schemes, to point out both the differences and the continuities over time. This requires a more flexible approach towards issues such as chronology and dates than the choice for 1996 as a point of departure of the empirical research suggests. I will thus go back and forth in time to explain how from halfway through the 1990s demands for accountability and debates over memory grew ‘more vigorous’.

The study concentrates on the city of Buenos Aires, the political, economic and demographic heart of the country. The focus of the research lies on national politics and developments rather than looking at the particularities of the provinces, a perspective that would have required a different approach. The concentration of political institutions and

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12 Email communication 2007.
human rights organizations, and of political and economic decisions of national relevance in the city of Buenos Aires demands a focus on developments in the capital city. Furthermore, in spite of contextual differences, the struggle for truth, justice and memory that unfolded in Buenos Aires acquired similar characteristics in the other two major urban centres of the country, Rosario and Córdoba. The patterns of repression in these cities were very similar to those in Buenos Aires, and the reactions and resilience of victims and solidarity unfolded in similar ways as well. Thus, when reflecting upon phenomena that occurred in Buenos Aires, some conclusions can also be drawn about what happened in these other urban areas.

Limiting the field of research to the capital also had another advantage, namely, the possibility of combining small-scale ethnographic research with the historical perspective, which is more inclined to look at broader developments over time. I was thus able to realize in-depth studies of several phenomena occurring in this city, which were at the same time of crucial importance for national developments because of their location in the capital city. The case studies chosen focus on certain characters, events, or debates. They were chosen because they reflect a number of developments that started to acquire more visibility from the mid-1990s onwards, while at the same time enabling me to analyse some of the processes at stake in the political struggles over the past in greater detail. They either give insights into the interactions between a varied number of actors involved in the struggles over the past, or in how particular debates over how to interpret the recent past have unfolded, or permit me to get a better understanding of how specific contemporary developments influence the struggles over the past. Taken jointly, and in interaction with the broader historical process as it has developed since 1983, these cases offer insights into the way the struggles over the past unfolded over time and what issues were central in a given period and a given setting.

Data for this research were gathered during four periods of fieldwork. A pilot study took place from July to August 2001, in the preparatory phase of the project. A second and third larger period of fieldwork took place from March until November 2003 and from August 2004 until February 2005. Finally, the last period of data gathering took place in the months from October 2006 until December 2006. During the fieldwork I was based in Buenos Aires, but also travelled on a regular basis to the nearby city of Rosario in the province of Santa Fe, as well as making trips to the cities of La Plata, Morón and San Nicolás, all located in the province of Buenos Aires. The empirical data were obtained through a combination of written sources such as newspaper articles, official declarations, pamphlets and other sources, including in-depth interviews, as well as informal conversations and participant observation. In-depth interviews and participant observation were principally realized among the groups struggling for truth, justice and memory. Written material, and particularly newspapers proved useful in tracing some of the visions and attitudes of other societal and state actors, such as state leaders and representatives, politicians, or the military and the police.

13 In her study on Malvinas, Guber (1999: 44) reflects on the centrality of memory activities related to the Malvinas War in the capital of Buenos Aires: ‘Although most of the events analysed in these pages happen in the Argentine capital, people from the provinces usually take part in them. But the fact that the city of Buenos Aires is the main setting also reveals that porteño memories are usually hegemonic in Argentines’ views of their political past’. Similarly, Jelin (quoted in Calderón 1986: 23) reflects on the centrality of Buenos Aires as follows: ‘Argentina is a highly urbanized country, even though the agricultural production constitutes the core of the economic dynamics of the country for its role in foreign trade. Even more so, it is a macrocephalic country, with an urban agglomeration that rallies one third of the population, but almost the totality of political and economic decisions’.
The research started from a broad perspective to get a better understanding of the field, adopting a more focussed approach during the end of my first period of fieldwork and even more so during the subsequent two periods. My first interviews were mainly of an orientational character, exploring the human rights movement and aiming to expand my contacts. However, once my network started to broaden as well as my knowledge of the subject, I started to conduct interviews on a more frequent basis, combining this with other fieldwork activities such as the consultation of archives and participating in activities organized by the human rights movement. At the end of my first fieldwork, I had identified some of the cases and events that I wished to study in greater detail. During the last fieldwork, participation in meetings, gatherings, commemorations and other public and less public activities were combined with the analysis of the different kinds of documents and in-depth interviews. I ended up conducting approximately 130 in-depth interviews with leaders and rank-and-file members of human rights organizations, individuals participating in memory projects, victims of the repression, members of governmental institutions, former political activists, artists and intellectuals concerned with the subject.

Each one of the four periods of fieldwork was marked by some event that strongly influenced the character of the activities and debates about the recent past of that particular period, and also found expression in the interviews I conducted for the research. The first fieldwork, in July 2001, was marked by the depressing context preceding the outburst in December 2001. During the second fieldwork, the election of president Kirchner and his policies in the field of memory, truth and justice, particularly the annulment of the amnesty laws in August 2003, profoundly shaped the conversations I had. Then, in 2004, the decision to recover the ESMA for memory, a widely applauded measure, strongly contrasted with the disillusion with other aspects of Kirchner’s presidency, particularly at the level of socio-economic policies. Internal divisions within the human rights movement as a consequence of different evaluations of his policies almost always popped up in interviews on the subject. Finally, during the last fieldwork, the disappearance of one of the witnesses in a human rights trial, Julio López in September 2006 was on everybody’s hearts and minds. Sometimes I wondered how to deal with the extremely dynamic political context. However, this shifting historical context and its influence on my conversations with interviewees was particularly revealing of the importance of the present in the debates over the past in Argentina.

The fieldwork was also a highly emotional journey into people’s painful experiences of loss and suffering. Personal experiences of state terrorism have profoundly shaped people’s public efforts to define what is truthful and meaningful about the recent past. During my fieldwork I was submerged for months in the world of those who had made the struggle for truth, justice and memory their lifetime project after having gone through such experiences. I listened to the life stories of mothers who had lost all their children and had succeeded in transforming their grief into activism. I spoke to children of the disappeared who, after suffering numerous disillusions, continued to search for their brother or sister born in captivity. I heard stories of people who had been abducted, tortured and were trapped for long periods in the obscure underworld of the secret detention centres. Many had been able, in spite of everything, to reconstruct their shattered lives and give a new meaning to their past experiences. Others were still struggling to make sense of it all. Listening to these stories was a constant reminder of the fact that the struggles over the recent past have a profound existential dimension for those who are involved. It pointed to the importance of developing
analytical explanations that would not lose sight of the stories of loss and suffering in which these struggles were embedded (Hernández Castillo 2006: 150).

The setting in which the fieldwork was carried out was a highly contentious one, raising the ethical problem of the political stakes of the research. Carrying out fieldwork in an environment of heightened group antagonism and polarization makes it difficult to sustain the position of the detached, neutral observer. In such a context, being open about one’s own political position might be the only ethical option. In her study on the environmentalist campaign against an industrial forestry project in the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica, for instance, Van den Hombergh (2004: 283) makes an explicit choice against impartiality, taking sides with the campaigners. She claims that in addition to a strong personal and professional sympathy for their cause, the context was so polarized that she would never have been able to enter the protest community if she had not been so explicit about her political support for their cause. I came to a similar conclusion in the context of this research. In a context in which there are still voices that deny the disappearances or justify them, and in which human rights activists and victims of the repression continue to suffer verbal and physical threats, I chose to identify with the search for truth and justice and to be explicit about my position when establishing relations in the field.

Being explicit about one’s sympathies, however, does not preclude a critical approach to the research subject. In this book, I have tried to develop a sympathetic but critical analysis of the struggle for truth, justice and memory. This means not being afraid to write about issues that might not be in line with the vested interests of groups and movements (Tate 2007: 26–7). Such an approach underlies the choice to write about a politically sensitive topic such as the conflicts that have arisen within the human rights movement. This is not a comfortable choice. In Argentina, writing about the internal differences within the human rights movement is particularly difficult. These conflicts are hardly what the movement wishes to show to the outside world. It does not offer the image of unity that participants in the struggle consider important to convince others of the justness of their cause. Yet, the internal differences are inevitable, they are part of the daily reality of the movement and sometimes erupt in the public sphere. At the same time, these internal differences are used in the press and by conservative sectors to de-legitimize the movement. It is these kinds of situations that have moved engaged scholars to plead against ‘humanizing power’ or against investigating the troubled micro-politics of social movements (Warren 2006: 220). These types of calls are also frequent among scholars and human rights activists in Argentina and have led them to silence issues that might weaken the public image of the movement. Similarly, reflecting on the Colombian case, Tate (2007: 23) states that here too, scholars have strategically ignored certain issues, a choice understandable in a context in which human rights organizations are under attack from both right-wing- and mainstream politics.

But such silences or forms of ‘self-censorship’ (Warren 2006: 221) also have political and analytical implications. Reflecting on these implications, Warren (2006: 221) asks: ‘Does it mean that whole domains of social life have been, in effect, off the table of richer ethnographic analysis?’ She rather pleads for credible, critical and sympathetic social science that does not reproduce older polarizing discourse, and does not idealize social movements or demonize and essentialize at least one party in the analysis. Similarly, Tate (2007: 26) chooses not to ignore the delicate topic of the legacy of leftist political culture in the Colombian human rights movement, thereby contributing to a more informed debate. She also chooses to address controversies within the movement, going against the argument that ‘now is not
the time even to air the controversies addressed here’. She responds to this argument stating that she believes that, on the contrary, ‘beginning to address these contradictory legacies and practices is necessary to fully understand the present and begin to work toward a less violent future’. My argument for addressing the internal debates among the various groups struggling for memory is very similar. I believe they are an integral part of the story of how Argentine society deals with its recent past, and that understanding what lies behind the numerous conflicts and controversies will help us to make a more realistic assessment of the challenges ahead.

A final word should be spoken on how the interviewed persons and their organizations are addressed throughout the book. Specific organizations and institutions will always be identified, unless the matter is too delicate and might cause the organization trouble. Then it will be referred to by its generic characteristics, such as ‘solidarity organization’ or ‘organization of victims’. Public figures such as well-known human rights representatives, public intellectuals, journalists, published authors, politicians and public officials will be referred to by their own names. In the case of controversial statements, or when discussing a conflictive situation in a given memory project, I will identify them by the generic categories relevant in that particular context, such as their membership of a particular organization or their character of victim or non-victim. All the other interviewees will be referred to with first-name-only pseudonyms. Although I would rather have given recognition to all those who play important roles in the struggle for truth, justice and memory, I decided to conceal their identities after verbal and physical threats against human rights activists increased from 2003 onwards. Furthermore, many of these persons provided me with valuable insights into the internal dynamics of the human rights movement, but would not necessarily want to be identified with these insights. Giving them fictitious names is a way of respecting their privacy and their position in the movement. Finally, all the interviews were conducted in Spanish. The translations of extracts of these interviews are my own.

**Structure of the book**

The structure of this book follows both a chronological and a thematic logic. The first section of the book provides a historical background for the two other ones, which analyse two of the most important developments of the period from the mid-1990s onwards in more detail: the emergence of new actors in the struggles over the past, and the changes in the political and institutional context after Kirchner’s election in 2003. The first section, then, deals with the period of the democratic transition until the mid-1990s, when the human rights organizations that emerged during the military dictatorship were still very much the central actor pressing for truth and justice. In its confrontation with official policies of silence and impunity, the human rights movement tried to construct a larger basis within civil society. The need to develop strategies to gain the support of the population intensified after a number of laws were adopted to end the legal accountability process, and public attention was diverted from the matters of the past. Activities to commemorate and remember the recent past became both a means to pressure for justice and to mobilize civil society for their cause.

The second chapter analyses the context in which the struggle for truth, justice and memory has emerged. In the first years of democracy from 1983 to 1985, the human rights
issue was of central importance in Argentine public life. The human rights movement was at its strongest in this period, and this was reflected in the importance attributed to the human rights issue during the first years of Alfonsín’s presidential term. However, although temporarily defeated, the armed forces still remained a powerful actor in the background. This importantly influenced the accountability process. The result was a compromise between different actors trying to influence the process. A crucial element of this period was also the framing of the military dictatorship in the juridical language of human rights violations instead of in terms of a political conflict. This way of framing the events has had important consequences for the societal process of remembering in the years thereafter. Therefore special attention will be paid to how this frame emerged in an interaction between official narratives, the narrative of the military, the perspective of the human rights movement, and the attitude of large sectors of civil society towards the flow of information on the repression.

The third chapter then, focuses on how the human rights movement attempted to regain some of the public space it lost after Alfonsín and, later, Menem stopped and even reversed the advances made in the juridical realm through amnesty laws and presidential pardons. As a consequence of these official policies and of the emergence of new problems and of new social and political organizations, the human rights movement underwent several important transformations. It developed new strategies to counter impunity, and started to realize the importance of constructing a collective memory of the military dictatorship. Constructing memory became an increasingly central issue, and a means to break down impunity and to consolidate democracy. One of the developments contributing to these changes was the participation of a new generation of victims – the children of the disappeared – in the struggles over the past. They brought in new ideas on how to pressure for truth, justice and memory.

The second part of the book describes and analyses the growing complexity of the debate over the past as a consequence of the increased involvement of new participants in the struggle. In the fourth chapter I discuss how, from the mid-1990s onwards, politically aware neighbours, victims and non victims became involved in the struggle for memory, truth and justice. In several cases these persons started to organize in their own neighbourhoods. In some neighbourhoods the presence of a former secret detention centre during the military dictatorship left its marks on societal relations and individuals living in its surroundings. One of these neighbourhoods is Floresta, where the presence of the secret detention centre of El Olimpo led to important mobilizations of the neighbourhood to regain the place for memory. In the struggle that unfolded in this context, various commissions of neighbours played an active role. The participation of these new actors has led to new expressions of collective memory, revealing the great diversity of memories on the period of the military dictatorship. But this diversity also led to tensions. In the context of the struggle, differences emerged on what strategy to adopt to regain the site for memory, and particularly on how to relate to the state. Later, when the former detention centre became a memory site, differences arose concerning the meaning that was to be attributed to the site.

In the fifth chapter, the focus lies on the debates that started to develop from midway through the 1990s about the years of social protests that preceded the military coup, and more specifically on the revolutionary organizations that occupied a protagonist role in that period. The chapter describes how, after many years of silence, former members of these organizations increasingly participated in the debates on the recent past. For different reasons such as official policies and personal difficulties in processing their stories of loss and
suffering, many former militants remained on the sideline for a long time. For several reasons, which will be explored in this chapter, this silence started to crumble from the mid-1990s, leading to a debate on the revolutionary struggles and ideals of the 1960s and ‘70s which continues until today. In this debate, attempts to vindicate the struggles of the 1970s often clash with the vision of other groups within society, among them new generations, members of the academia, and some of the more institutionalized human rights organizations. At the same time, former militants themselves display significant differences in their interpretation of both the past and of the present, and in their vision of what should be rescued from their previous political experiences.

Finally, the third part of the book deals with the important changes in the institutional and political context that occurred at the national level after Kirchner was elected President of Argentina in 2003. His presidential term marked a growing involvement of the state in matters of the past, a process that had already started at the local level of Buenos Aires and some other municipalities. This development had important consequences for the struggle for truth, justice and memory, which will be discussed in the two last chapters of the book.

In the sixth chapter, attention will be paid to how the human rights movement interpreted and readjusted to the new political context, and the heated debates it unleashed among the various participants within the movement. Ideological and political differences on how to deal with the democratic state and how to conceive one’s own role in a democratic system emerged, and divided the movement over the interpretation of the new context. Whereas some chose for the further institutionalization of their demands, others chose the opposition ranks, leading to important differences within the movement.

The seventh chapter focuses on a specific case, the debates on the contents and purpose of the ‘Space for Memory and Human Rights’ in the ESMA. This case brings together the two most important developments of recent years that have been described throughout the book: the growing plurality of agents of memory and the new political and institutional context. The chapter analyses the consequences of a more pro-active state on matters of the past in combination with the growing involvement of new actors, particularly professionals working on memory, such as academics, museum specialists and artists, among others. Heated debates emerged between the historical human rights organizations, particularly those composed principally of victims of the repression, and these professionals on what to remember and how. One of the main issues of debate was how much room should be left for interpretations of the past that diverged from those offered by the human rights movement. These debates on the existence of a plurality of memories occurred in a context that was marked by the resurgence of voices vindicating state terrorism and even acts of violence such as verbal and physical aggressions against witnesses in the renewed human rights trials. This context strongly marked the position of the human rights movement, which tended to focus on protecting what it had achieved rather than creating room for new interpretations.