Struggling with the past: the human rights movement and the politics of memory in post-dictatorship Argentina (1983-2006)
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5. The former militants of the 1970s: reintroducing politics in the memories of the past

In 1996 one of the first documentaries on the revolutionary movements of the 1970s, *Cazadores de Utopía*, was distributed on a small scale in the cinemas of Buenos Aires. The documentary was based on testimonies of former members of the revolutionary left, and was designed to break with prevailing visions on this experience, which the director and his team considered inaccurate. Whereas the documentary was welcomed by former militants who had participated in revolutionary organizations, intellectuals – some of whom had been militants themselves – and members of younger generations criticised its nostalgic tone. In the academic journal *Punto de Vista*, one of the authors stated that the documentary concealed the real objective of the revolutionary organizations, the seizing of state power, behind the more diffuse notion of ‘utopia’. In the leftist newspaper *Página/12*, a journalist too young to have taken part in political involvement in the 1970s criticized the documentary for idealizing the experience. She also stated that the documentary used a language that excluded those who had not participated in these experiences. Her criticism generated a minor polemic involving former militants and members of younger generations.

The polemic on *Cazadores de Utopía* was part of an emerging debate on the revolutionary organizations of the 1970s. From the mid-1990s, a growing number of movies, publications and other cultural products on the revolutionary experience of the 1970s found their way to the public. This outburst of cultural products, mainly publications, occurred after a long period during which, with a few exceptions, former militants had remained silent on their political experience in the 1970s. The authors were generally former members of revolutionary organizations, and their work aimed at deconstructing prevailing accounts on the militant experience. They also criticized the dominant memories that tended to silence the political identity of the disappeared, and aimed at constructing a memory that recognized the political choices for radical social change of a great majority of the victims. These initiatives were favourably received by many former militants, but also led to critical reactions. These came from other former militants, as well as from persons who had not participated in the revolutionary organizations, among them intellectuals, human rights activists and members

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189 By revolutionary organizations I refer to the politico-military (or guerrilla) organizations that emerged at the beginning of the 1970s. Among the non-Peronist Marxist organizations, the most important one was the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People’s Revolutionary Army, ERP), the armed force of the *Partido de los Trabajadores* (Workers Revolutionary Party, PRT). Within the Peronist orientation *Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas* (Peronist Armed Forces, FAP), *Descamisados* and *Montoneros* were the three main organizations. After 1972, Montoneros absorbed all the other Peronist guerrilla organizations. Both PRT-ERP and Montoneros were composed of a relatively small group of combatants who carried out all kinds of armed operations, from stealing food to distributing it among the poor, to attacks on police stations, bank robberies and the bombing of several commercial establishments, or the extortive kidnapping of managers and representatives of big companies. These organizations also included a large group of grassroots militants who carried out political propaganda activities (see among many others, Gillespie 1982; Marchak 1999; Robben 2005).
of younger generations. The debate that unfolded on how to evaluate these experiences revealed fragmented memories and often incompatible visions within the group of former militants, and between former militants and persons who had not participated in these experiences.

The evaluation of the role of the revolutionary organizations of the 1970s remains one of the burning issues in the debate on the recent past. What is at stake in this debate? This chapter will argue that political and ideological stances in the present constantly influence the memories and interpretations of the revolutionary experience of the 1970s. It will show that behind the discussions on how to interpret past events lies a political struggle for the legitimacy in the present of certain ideals and values that guided that particular historical experience, as well as a discussion on who should bear the responsibility for the dramatic events of the dictatorship. The argument will be made through an analysis of how the debate on the revolutionary experience evolved over time. In the first part of the chapter, I will discuss the initial absence of a debate on the recent past and the silence of the surviving members of the revolutionary organizations, explaining how the general historical context interacted with personal difficulties of former protagonists to speak publicly about their experiences. The second part will focus on the growing visibility of former militants from the mid-1990s onwards and the different ways in which they intervened in the public space. What elements interacted to create a public space for former militants to enable them to tell their stories, and what stories did they choose to tell once they decided to speak up about their past experiences? Finally, the last part will show how these public stories on the revolutionary experience were received beyond the circles of former militants, and how a debate unfolded on what could eventually be learned or recovered from this experience for the present.

**Constructed silences in the narrative of the recent past**

This section shows how, during the military dictatorship and in the transition to democracy, a silence was constructed around the militant experience that had mobilized thousands of people in the years preceding the military coup. The dominant narrative of that period reduced the complex social and political experience of the 1970s to a confrontation between guerrilla combatants and the armed forces, with society trapped in the middle. This dominant narrative became firmly entrenched in society and also expressed a general difficulty, within Argentine society, in understanding the full scope of what had occurred before and during the military dictatorship. This was even the case for human rights activists and relatives of the disappeared. They sought explanations as to why some had survived and others had not, and applied moral categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to experiences that were far more ambiguous. The consequence was that survivors of disappearance, exile and imprisonment were looked upon with suspicion. All these elements contributed to a situation in which there was little room for former militants to tell their stories. This lack of public space also interacted with the personal traumas caused by physical endurance and the loss of not only friends and companions of militants, but also of a life project. This personal dimension also greatly influenced how each one of the survivors of the revolutionary experience chose to participate in the new political and social context of the transition.
Dominant narratives after the transition

As we saw in chapter two, after the transition to democracy, several elements converged to construct a partial account of the 1970s, in which the widespread social protest that had characterized those years was reduced to the actions of a handful of guerrilla combatants. Attention in the 1980s was more on denouncing the human rights violations committed, and on assembling juridical proof on the systematic character of the disappearances, than on exploring the political causes of the repression. From the side of the official authorities there was even a conscious policy to de-politicize the events of the 1970s and make an end to any attempt to vindicate either the logic of necessity of the armed forces, or the political ideals and struggles of the revolutionary organizations. In the dominant interpretation of the period, the so-called ‘theory of the two devils’, these organizations were accused of spreading terror and of sharing equal responsibility with the armed forces in the events that led to state terrorism. This interpretation, which was institutionalized through official policies, was widespread in the 1980s. Common citizens massively rejected anything that even remotely reminded the political practices of the 1970s, and they had no interest in revising the projects and ideals that had motivated them in the first place.

The strongest public rejection was directed towards the surviving former leadership of Montoneros, and particularly against the number one Mario Firmenich. In a survey conducted in September 1989 on the presidential pardons, 83 percent of the interviewees stated that Mario Firmenich should not be pardoned. After his release in 1991, he was repudiated in public on numerous occasions and the student centre of the Faculty of Economic Sciences where he was studying declared him ‘persona non grata’. In 1996 he announced that he would leave the country because he was unable to ‘reinsert into society’. But other less public members of Montoneros and PRT-ERP also felt the weight of the stigmatization of the guerrilla organizations. At a very concrete level, in the 1980s former militants could hardly mention their previous political identities, because there was a risk of being legally prosecuted. Several political prisoners from the period of the dictatorship remained in prison up until 1987. Various former detained-disappeared of the ESMA even had legal cases running against them, being accused of involvement in a number of kidnappings carried out by Montoneros (Interview MP2 07.01.2005).

The attack on the military barracks of La Tablada, Buenos Aires, which marked guerrilla resurgence in January 1989, strongly contributed to this generalized rejection. Among those who participated in the attack were a large number of former members of the PRT-ERP, the most well-known being one of its former leaders, Enrique Gorriarán Merlo. According to Eduardo, former member of the PRT-ERP, the events of La Tablada made it impossible to vindicate any of the actions of the PRT-ERP:

…I think this was a fierce blow, and what’s more, the proof is there that never again in Argentina would there be a revolutionary group that could recover this history of militancy of the 1970s. Today, there are some groups founded by former militants of the PRT but who do not vindicate this story. Nowadays, there is a very large group of people within Kirchnerism that originate from the PRT, but no – because people know this – they do not speak about the PRT. They make a

190 The survey was conducted by Heriberto Muraro (González Bombal and Landi 1995: 174).
191 Clarín, 20.03.1996; Página/12, 21.03.1996.
192 For details on the attack of La Tablada see chapter two.
kind of before and after. They never spoke about this again, they always maintained this idea of, 'well, let us not disturb a ghost'. (Interview EA3 24.11.2004)

Graciela, another former member of PRT-ERP, who participated in the organization of a new political movement including several former militants of the PRT-ERP explained that when they invited persons to participate, people's first reaction was one of horror. They 'did not know whether Gorriarán Merlo was behind us, or whether we would have the same madness. They looked at us with fear and preoccupation' (Interview GD2 05.01.2005).

We saw in chapter two that the stigma surrounding the guerrilla experience led human rights organizations and relatives of the disappeared to silence the political identity of their loved ones. What started as a defence mechanism under the military dictatorship continued after the transition because of the generally hostile reactions towards anything that might be associated with the guerrillas. Alejandro, a former member of the *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense* (Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, EAAF), recalls that such silences frequently occurred when the team started to do research in the second half of the 1980s:

And here we collided with another issue, and that is that the relatives denied the political militancy of their disappeared loved ones. The repression in Argentina was very selective, there were people who did not engage in political militancy and also disappeared, but at that time and also partly today, there were relatives who have to deal with their respective guilt: And the son was... a political militant, committed, surely, to armed struggle. (Interview AI 14.12.2004)

It was not only the external context that made it difficult for relatives to recognize the militancy of their loved ones. In many cases they also shared ideological differences with the political choices of their relatives. Many of those who later became active members of human rights organizations had observed the militancy of their children with reluctance, especially if they had been members of a guerrilla organization. In several cases, they had been politically conservative and criticized the choice for armed struggle of their children (Interview AI 14.12.2004). In other cases, they were not interested in politics and were confronted with the implications of the political choices of their children when they disappeared. In this sense, according to Graciela, former member of PRT-ERP, the denial of the political militancy of the disappeared was almost a logical reaction: 'Neither could we expect much more, because they did not come from political organizations, a militant history of many years. They were fathers and mothers who went out to search for their children' (Interview GD2 05.01.2005).

As a consequence, in the years of the transition, human rights organizations and relatives constructed an image of the disappeared that systematically omitted their political commitments. A young person who did social work in the neighbourhood as a member of a revolutionary organization was presented as a social worker and his political affiliation was not mentioned. Intellectuals, writers and artists affiliated to revolutionary organizations were said to have disappeared because of their profession. This limited the possibilities of

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193 Journalist Rodolfo Walsh, an emblematic victim of the repression, was also part of the intelligence team of Montoneros; Héctor Oesterheld, author of the comics *El Eternauta*, was also member of Montoneros; Haroldo Conti, well-known writer, was a member of the PRT-ERP, to name just a few examples.
society to fully understand the mechanisms of the repression. It made it particularly difficult for organizations like the EAAF, which were dedicated to truth-seeking, to reconstruct the exact fate of the disappeared. The repression had its own logic: it dismantled revolutionary organizations through the practice of abduction, torture and fresh abductions. Thus in order to understand how the sequence of disappearances had occurred and why someone had been abducted, it was necessary to know the nature of his militancy and his level in the organization (Interview AI 14.12.2004). Furthermore, in many cases, militants had gone into hiding and parents did not always know where they had been living at the moment of their disappearance. To reconstruct the story of when and where someone had disappeared, it was necessary to speak to fellow-militants who had more information on the daily activities of the disappeared person. Knowing the militancy of a disappeared then, was of crucial importance (Interview CA 13.08.2003).

Throughout the 1980s, the de-politicized image of the disappeared predominated in the narratives on the past. The role played by the human rights organizations in consolidating this image was strongly criticized from the 1990s onwards by new organizations like H.I.J.O.S. and by former militants. However, as Pilar Calveiro, a former Montonera, recalls, it was also a way of making their demands viable in a particular historical context in which a distinction was still made between ‘guilty’ and ‘innocent’ victims. In this sense, the case clearly shows how the needs of the present determine the content of memory: different memories are constructed according to the needs of each historical moment.

Surviving the repression: coping with the legacies of terror and moral judgements

Former militants themselves also contributed to these silences and remained in the background for a long time. Reflecting on this situation Mariana, daughter of a disappeared couple states: ‘…I think that they did not speak because society was not ready to listen to them’ (Interview MP2 07.01.2005). But personal difficulties in processing the losses suffered as a consequence of the repression also contributed to leaving the dominant narratives on the past unchallenged. All those who had been politically involved in the 1970s and had survived had to cope with the legacies of the repression. They all had suffered traumatic experiences during the military dictatorship. They had either survived disappearance, or been political prisoners, gone into exile or had been forced to hide in their own country, or a combination of these experiences. In all cases they had lost friends, relatives and fellow-militants, and had lost a project that had entirely structured their lives. The society into which they returned after having spent years in secret detention centres, prisons, or in exile, had been profoundly transformed as a consequence of the military dictatorship, and fitting back in was not easy.

These personal difficulties were reinforced by the fact that they were often confronted with moral judgements, and with ambiguous feelings about their survival, especially among relatives of the disappeared. The situation was especially difficult for the survivors of the secret detention centres because they were telling a story that nobody wanted to hear. While the Madres were still hoping to see their children alive, the survivors were saying that the military were systematically assassinating all prisoners (Pastoriza 2004a: 55). Furthermore, the experience of survivors did not fit into the moral and political framework that prevailed at the time. In many cases detainees in the secret detention centres had to pretend to convert to the ideology of the military and reject their past. Resistance lay in little things and was not

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194 Conference Pilar Calveiro at the UTPBA, Fieldnotes, 17.08.2004.
immediately visible to the eye. In such a context, some survivors interpreted their liberation as a small victory over a repressive system that was oriented towards extermination. This was not always understood as such by those who had not gone through this experience. Thus Lila Pastoriza (2004a: 55) explains: ‘Obviously, there were a lot of matters that made it difficult to explain what the world of the clandestine centres was, the ambiguity that characterized it. The people asked us for heroes and traitors, black or white, things that did not exist in that way or at least did not exist in my experience’.

As a consequence, after their liberation, survivors were questioned for having survived while so many others never returned. Ana, former detained-disappeared, recalls that within the human rights organizations, there was a strong distrust of survivors, as rumours circulated that all those who had been released had collaborated with the military. Reflecting on this situation she states: ‘That part was very difficult, this thing that you felt that there were doubts about why you had survived. The same way that there had been a “for some reason they took them” (por algo se los llevaron), “for some reason they released them” (por algo los liberaron)’ (Interview AFB2 09.10.2004). For the mothers of the disappeared it was particularly difficult to accept the fact that some had survived whereas their own children remained disappeared. Osvaldo recalls that some mothers whose children had disappeared questioned him and other survivors by asking: ‘Why is my son disappeared and you survived?’ (Interview OB 13.10.2004). According to Cecilia, a member of the EAAF, these suspicions continue to play a role today (Interview CA 13.08.2003).

Until their dissolution at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the politico-military organizations to which many of the survivors had been affiliated also pronounced harsh judgements. The very presence of these survivors was unbearable, because it challenged both the ideological convictions and the revolutionary morale that had guided these organizations. The whole revolutionary undertaking was based on the idea that people were masters of their own destiny, and that they could determine how to live and how to die. Personal sacrifice and martyrdom were central values. The conviction was that one should live heroically and die the same way. According to the revolutionary morale, militants should never fall into the hands of the enemy alive. Talking under torture was considered a moral degradation, and committing suicide a victory over the enemy. The capsule of cyanide that the members of Montoneros carried with them everywhere to prevent them from being kidnapped alive was part of this philosophy. But the repressive system implemented in Argentina was precisely oriented towards the destruction of the identity and the sense of agency of the victims (Calveiro 1998). Thus, contrary to what revolutionary organizations

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195 See Feinmann 1998: 72 for an analysis of the relation of the Montoneros with heroism and death. See Carnovale 2005 for an analysis of these same issues within the PRT-ERP.

196 See for example the ‘Carta a mis amigos’, that Rodolfo Walsh wrote shortly after the suicide of his daughter, Vicky Walsh, a member of Montoneros, in which he speaks of the ‘moral degradation, giving away information (la delación)’ caused by torture (Anguita and Caparrós 1998b: 167–8).

197 This measure was introduced after the disappearance, in December 1975, of Roberto Quieto, member of the Montonero leadership. He was detained and tortured, and there was evidence that he had been talking under torture. Besides bringing him to trial in absence for treason, it made the leadership decide that they should never surrender alive, and should they be abducted, they should either fight back or commit suicide by taking the cyanide capsule. According to Firmenich himself, this measure was later extended to all members of Montoneros, after the common members of the organization criticized the leadership for keeping for themselves the privilege of not being tortured (Felipe Pigna, ‘Entrevista a Mario Firmenich’, www.elhistoriador.com.ar).
assumed, in the underworld of the secret detention centres, victims never really had a choice and they certainly had no influence on whether they would die or survive. Even when they tried to commit suicide, the victimizers brought them back to life, because they were the ones to decide when one should die (Actis et. al. 2001; Longoni 2005: 221).

In such a context, the revolutionary morale that was supposed to guide the militant’s actions, proved unsustainable. People did fall into the hands of the military alive, and they did talk under torture. Furthermore, they had to deploy strategies to cope with a repressive system that tended to destroy their very subjectivity. In doing so they transited through what Primo Levi has called ‘the grey zone’, or what Calveiro (1998: 128) has reformulated in the Argentine case as follows: ‘The camp is an infinite range, not of grey, which supposes a combination of white and black, but rather of different colours in which clear, pure tones do not appear, but rather multiple combinations’. This reality did not fit into the binary logic of heroes and traitors that predominated in the revolutionary organizations, and they rather chose to judge the survivors according to the moral standards that they were accustomed to. According to these moral standards, survivors had betrayed the revolutionary cause. They were considered traitors because they had survived whereas according to the revolutionary code they should have died in combat, and because their coping strategies did not fit into the logic that guided these organizations and their actions.198

These moral judgments contributed to creating a taboo on the issue of collaboration. Thus, according to Cecilia, a member of the EAAF: ‘There are themes that are taboo, like the collaboration of the detainee. It is a taboo. One can not speak about it. There is still a division between those who acted in the right way and those who acted badly. There were many different levels of collaboration, that is for sure’ (Interview CA 13.08.2003). Similarly, Marisa, survivor of the ESMA states:

Most of the kids handed over some piece of information, an appointment, a house, but kept the rest for themselves. But this piece of information was the one that unfortunately fed the famous cadena de cantadas (one detention leading to the other). This is something that you can still not talk about with the [human rights] organizations, with the relatives you can not talk about it, nor with a lot of former militants either. But those are the facts. (Interview MS1 05.10.2004)199

Survivors themselves contributed to this taboo as well, internalizing the idea that some things that happened in the secret detention centres could not bear the light of day. Reflecting on this situation Elisa, survivor of the ESMA states: ‘Some fellow-militants believe that “there are things that can never be told” and I disagree with that’ (Actis et. al. 2001: 99).

The judgments and suspicions towards those who were liberated reinforced their own feelings of guilt for having survived. They had no answer to the question why they had survived, and, according to Lila (2004a: 55), ‘we felt very guilty for not being able to provide

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198 See Longoni 2005 for a very interesting analysis of how the figure of the traitor was constructed in three different novels on the militant experience of the 1970s, *Recuerdo de la muerte*, *El fin de la historia*, and *Los compañeros*.

199 See also the discussion between Miriam Lewin and Elisa Tokar in: Actis et.al. 2001: 99-100.
an answer. For those who had themselves believed in the binary logic of the 1970s, not being able to fit the personal experience of disappearance into this framework was a constant source of guilt. In this context Elisa recalls having met a former fellow-militant after twenty years, who, to her astonishment, started off the conversation by telling her that he had given no names under torture. Recounting the situation she states: ‘I stood there staring at him and was thinking: “What is he saying to me? How can it be that he is giving me this militant explanation after everything that happened?” Guilt is a recurrent theme; it seems that for being alive I am carrying all the deaths on my shoulders. You carry them with you, have them inside your soul’ (Actis et.al. 2001: 279).

Guilt, however, was not limited to survivors of secret detention centres, but was also a common feeling among those who had been liberated from the state prisons, had returned from exile, or had simply lived through the dictatorship in Argentina. People felt guilty for having survived while so many others had died. For exiles who had been affiliated to the revolutionary organizations, these feelings were enhanced by the fact that, according to the moral standards of their organizations, leaving the country meant betraying the cause. Moral judgements of fellow-militants who remained in the country reinforced a personal sense of betrayal and loss. Paula recalls that when she went into exile: ‘I felt that I was saving myself while others were staying. There was first and foremost a feeling of “every man for himself” and this, the people who stayed behind carrying out militant actions absolutely questioned it. They questioned those who decided to leave’ (Guelar et.al. 2002: 122). Beatriz, who later went into exile herself, explains: ‘Various others had stopped being politically active and stayed in the country. They were called quebrados (broken), and they were treated with a lot of disdain’ (Guelar et.al. 2002: 98). Daniela mentions feeling constantly guilty while exiled in Spain: ‘…there was the guilt for being alive, for having money, for being with my parents, for being accompanied, for being able to study…’ (Guelar et.al. 2002: 185).

Questioning those who had left the country was not confined to the revolutionary organizations. During the dictatorship, the military denied the forced character of exile and constructed the image of an exilio dorado (golden exile). This notion was appropriated by some intellectuals, both inside and outside Argentina, who suggested that being an exile could also be considered a privilege. These moral judgements and the personal feelings of guilt for having survived made it difficult for exiles to speak openly about their experiences. Those stories that were told were constructed in opposition to the notion of ‘golden exile’, insisting on the forced character of exile and its tragic dimensions, an image of exile that

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200 There was no apparent logic in who was liberated and who was assassinated. Among the survivors were members of the political organizations that had supported the guerrilla and unionists, but also combatants of the guerrillas; individuals who had collaborated actively and others who had not even given names under torture. The AEDD, created in 1984 as a space of contention for those who had survived disappearance, formulated some hypothesis to answer the question of why they had survived. They stated that there was not one single criterion for liberation, although there were more releases after 1977. The decisions varied according to the military force that led the detention centre, the heads of every centre, and the political events occurring in the country. But the main reason they identify is that some individuals were liberated to inspire terror on the rest of the population through their testimonies (www.exdesaparecidos.org.ar; Longoni 2005: 209-10).

201 See the polemic between Liliana Hecker, who stayed in Argentina and Julio Cortázar, who went into exile even before the military dictatorship (Jensen 2000) and between Rodolfo Terragno and Osvaldo Bayer, both exiles (Bernetti and Giardanelli 2003: 128). See also a critical reaction of Bayer on intellectuals who had remained in Argentina in Roniger and Kierszenbaum 2005: 7.
Jensen (2000) has called *exilio martirio* (martyr exile). These two opposed images dominated the memory of exile, and left no room for the mix of both tragedy and normality that had also characterized many lives abroad. This mixture is well reflected in the following quote of Daniel. Recalling his return to Buenos Aires after years of exile in Spain he states: ‘I left alone when I was twenty, I was coming back at 27 and now there were three of us; it was not that bad and that also hurt’ (Guelar et. al. 2002: 151). The drama of the disappearances in Argentina further contributed to relegating the experience of exile to the sidelines, as also happened with the memories of political prisoners.

In general terms, all those who had suffered from the repression had to cope with feelings of guilt, moral judgements and with a lack of understanding for the complexity of the experience they had gone through. Those who had been members of revolutionary organizations also had to deal with the destruction of what had been a lifetime project. The general sense of defeat is well expressed by Mirta Clara, who was a political prisoner for eight years and whose husband was assassinated, when she states: ‘One desired so many things for oneself, and new possibilities for the country…put so much passion…and nothing of this was possible’ (Actis et. al 2001: 302). Similarly Tina, survivor of disappearance and former exile, explains:

> The most important part of my life includes nine years of militancy, the concentration camp, exile, life in Geneva. I spent all my youth inside the organization, and it is very difficult to start living again when everything you loved has ceased to exist. I have some things done. The problem is the five minutes of desperation and when I say: ‘they beat me’. It is these five minutes. (Diana 1996: 53)

For years, survivors concentrated on reconstructing their shattered lives. This left little room for reflection on their previous political activities, and even less for a more public debate on these issues. Necessarily, there was what historian Felipe Pigna calls a ‘natural delay’ in the public reflections on these experiences (Interview FP 06.06.2003).

**The public presence (and absence) of former militants after the transition**

After the transition to democracy, former militants chose their own paths according to their personal needs and the experiences they had gone through. Among the former militants who had survived repression in secret detention centres, a large group concentrated on the task of bearing witness about what had happened. For them, testifying about the repression was both a necessity and a means of resistance, as Lila (2004a: 54), survivor of the ESMA explains: ‘In the clandestine centres, the possibility to tell, that someone, even though it would only be one, would survive to denounce, was one of the central themes of the resistance and of the very possibility to survive. This was like some kind of obsession for the prisoners’. To testify about what had happened was felt as a responsibility towards those who had been killed. Jorge, survivor of El Vesubio, was convinced that he would be killed. When he was unexpectedly released, he made the promise to testify about what had happened and whom he had seen (Interview JW 29.11.2004). Survivors started to testify about their experiences during the military dictatorship, especially if they went into exile after their liberation, but they acquired visibility in the context of the truth commission and of the trial of the juntas. Their testimonies were also of great importance to the relatives of the disappeared who were searching for information on their loved ones. Most of the survivors had been in captivity with persons who remained disappeared, and this information could be a crucial piece of information in unravelling the truth about the final destiny of a disappeared person.
A group of survivors actively involved in this task of bearing witness soon felt the necessity to create their own organization, in which survivors would be able to share their experiences with others who had gone through similar situations. This led to the creation of the *Asociación de Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos* (Association of Ex Detained Disappeared, AEDD) in 1984. The AEDD insisted from an early stage that they were not only survivors of the repression, but also of a particular political experience. This shared story of political activism also differentiated them from other human rights organizations, as Jorge, the first president of the Association explains:

Because that of the Madres, Abuelas, it is different, these are people who, in general, did not have any kind of militancy, and whose child had been abducted, and from there they start having a political militancy in an area like that of human rights. We already had a militancy from before. So there were a lot of things in which we were different from the human rights organizations. (Interview JW 29.11.2004)

The AEDD and other survivors who testified during the trial of the juntas and before the truth commission were the most visible spokespersons among the survivors of the repression. But there was also a broad group of survivors who needed many years to process their experience and have the courage to tell their story or even to acknowledge themselves as survivors of the repression. Many testified for the first time in the context of the truth trials initiated in La Plata and in other cities from 1998 onwards. Events such as the twentieth anniversary of the military coup also triggered many survivors to testify. Some did not even tell their story to their own children, as was the case with Mario’s parents. He grew up thinking that they had never been politically involved, while in fact they had been active in Montoneros and had been survivors of secret detention centres. Reflecting on the difficulties of survivors of disappearance in dealing with their experience, Luis, a brother of a disappeared, explains:

Being a survivor was a very hard task, very hard, almost impossible to bear. It was very difficult to find the spaces to reorganize. There was the Association... [of Ex Detained Disappeared]. There were some spaces that were useful to open a bit of this horror that people had gone through. But there were also many survivors who shut the door, who left, who did not want to know, or who have only wanted to know after a long time. (Interview LC1 03.10.2003)

Fear was an important legacy of these experiences and it strongly conditioned the political participation of former militants after the military dictatorship. Reflecting on this situation, Noemí states:

We did things from the place where we were, from our working places, or each one of us in some activity that was feasible, with a lower profile, or a higher profile, depending on the possibilities, on what each one of us felt like doing, depending on the fear. Fear was determinant, there were

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202 See also: Emilce Moler, *Tantas Voces, Tantas Vidas*, año 1, n°4; Interview MS1 05.10.2004; Observations truth trial La Plata, Fieldnotes, 06.08.2003.

those who were not prepared to expose themselves to anything, and others who did assume a
certain risk. (Interview NC 10.08.2003)

Marisa and her husband were both detained-disappeared in the ESMA. This experience
left especially Marisa completely terrorized. When her husband wanted to resume unionist
activities she warned him: 'I am going to prepare your bag; you are not going to put at risk
my safety and that of my daughters, I do not want to know anything about anything. You
will have to choose, it is either the cooperative bank or staying in this house’ (Interview MS2
19.10.2004). Fear also interacted with a more general sense of disillusion generated by the loss
of a life project, of companions, of everything that had given meaning to one's actions before
the dictatorship. How this feeling limited the political re-inclusion of former militants is well
illustrated in the following quote of Liliana:

Where am I going to be politically active […] where am I going to find a place as marvellous as
this one, where life was militancy, where life was politics, where there really was a political project,
beyond whether it was feasible or not, we believed that it was feasible to a certain extent, we
believed that it was possible and now I can not find a place like that, everything stays half-hearted,
everything stays…nothing is enough… (Interview LC3 24.10.2003)

Still, many former militants did look for new fields of collective participation. A number of
former militants chose for party politics. A group of former Montoneros who had remained
close to the surviving leadership of the organization tried to regain some political space in
the Peronist Party through the Renovación Peronista (Interview FC 28.11.2004). Another
group of former Montoneros, under the leadership of the head of the Peronist Youth in the
1970s, Rodolfo Galimberti, tried to revive the Peronist Youth movement that had been
dismantled (Larraquy and Caballero 2000). In 1989 members of both movements supported
Menem in his campaign and later integrated his administration.204 Others chose for
political participation in one of the opposition parties, or participated in emerging political
alternatives that were critical of the traditional political parties. Examples are Polo Social, the
ARI in its early years, and Alianza Sur, which later became the Frente Grande. In all these
experiments, former militants participated or were even among the founding members.205
Others rejected party politics and the public exposure that it implied, and went in search of
different fields of participation. They became active in labour unions, in social and cultural
projects, in human rights organizations, or developed professional activities that reflected
their former engagements. Intellectuals rejoined the institutions that had ejected them
during the military dictatorship (Roniger and Kierszenbaum 2005: 13).

None of the former militants who rejoined different political, social and cultural spaces
tried to revive previous political experiences. They participated as individuals who did not
necessarily renege on their previous sympathies, but did not vindicate them either. This did
not mean that there was a common vision of what this experience had meant, and how it

204 According to journalist Silvina Walger, in 1994 there were five hundred former Montoneros and members
of the grassroots organizations of the Tendencia Revolucionaria working in Menem's administration
(Walger 1994). Among them were Fernando Vaca Narvaja and Roberto Perdía, as well as the wives of
Roberto Perdía and of Mario Firmenich. For more information on former members of the Revolutionary
Tendency within Peronism in Menem’s government, see: Gorbato 1999.

should be remembered. The survivors differed greatly in the way they evaluated their experiences. Internally, a process of critical revision of the revolutionary organizations had started among some groups within the communities in exile (Bernetti and Giardanelli 2003). Many of these criticisms were directed at the leadership of these organizations. In the case of Montoneros, however, the leadership insisted on vindicating each one of their decisions, even the most controversial ones. These differences would acquire a more public character from halfway through the 1990s. But until then, little of these internal debates transcended the circles of militants. The media did not offer a platform to discuss these issues, and the number of publications on the subject were limited compared to the documentation, testimonies, and analyses that would appear in the second half of the 1990s. Oberti and Pittaluga (2006: 136) state that in the 1980s, ‘the field of studies on the militancy and the politico-military organizations of the 1960 and ’70s was an almost uninhabited area’.

Publications from former militants on the subject were hardly evident. An exception was Juan Gasparini’s *Final de cuentas*, published in 1988. Gasparini was a former Montonero who had been detained in the ESMA for several years and his analysis was extremely critical of the leadership. Many of the issues he raised in his book would become central in the debates of the second half of the 1990s. Gaspirini’s book can be seen as a first attempt at critically reviewing the Montonero experiment without being condemnatory. On the side of the PRT-ERP, a similar attempt came some years later with Luis Mattini’s *Hombres y Mujeres del PRT-ERP* (1990), a critical analysis and insider account of the activities of the organization by one of its former leaders. Other works on the subject published in those years tended to focus on the problem of violence, and analysed the guerrilla as the expression of a broader political culture characterized by authoritarian and violent practices. Pablo Giussani, former adherent of Montoneros and author of *Montoneros, la soberbia armada* in 1984, wrote a condemnatory work in which the Montoneros were labelled as a terrorist organization comparable to the Red Brigades in Italy. A more nuanced study came from Hilb and Lutzky (1984), pioneers within academia in treating the subject of the guerrillas of the 1970s. They analysed the different expressions of the ‘new left’ and the related problem of political violence in Argentina. In their analysis, the emergence of the guerrilla was the expression of a broader authoritarian political culture that conceptualized politics as a war, thinking in terms of enemies and foes. They showed that the guerrilla organizations had no faith in democracy as a political system nor as a set of values that could direct political practices, and attributed responsibility to the guerrilla in creating the necessary conditions for a military take-over (Oberti and Pittaluga 2006: 133).

Hilb and Lutzky’s analysis, and other works produced on the subject in this period were inscribed in a broader revalorization, in the 1980s, of representative democracy among progressive intellectuals (Oberti and Pittaluga 2006: 133). Democracy was conceptualized as a political system based on pluralism and on the construction of consensus, in opposition to authoritarianism that conceived politics as a confrontation. This revalorization of democracy in opposition to the authoritarian political practices of the 1970s necessarily led to a break among intellectuals with the traditions of the 1960s and ’70s. This found expression in a process of ‘professionalization’ of intellectual practice. In contrast to the 1960s and ’70s, when intellectuals had been deeply involved in the political process, they now tried to establish

206 Other (academic and non-academic) publications on the revolutionary left in those years were Gillespie 1982; Bonasso 1984; Ollier 1986 and 1989; Santucho 1988; Antorena 1989; and Seoane 1992.
a distance between their professional practice and their political engagements (Interview FL 05.12.2006). It also found expression in the fact that concepts that had permeated the thinking on social and political reality were discarded. Reflecting on how many intellectuals dealt with their past militancy in 1992, philosopher José Pablo Feinmann stated:

One lives the militancy of the 1970s with guilt. It is as if the struggles of the 1970s meant the most absolute error. And from absolute error, the only consequence that can be drawn is absolute inaction. We have gone from ‘the one who is not politically active is an idiot’, as used to be said in the decade of the 1970s, to ‘the one who is politically active is out of fashion’, as is said nowadays. There are even words that have become discredited. Imperialism, dependency, socialism, revolution. Nobody talks about that anymore. (Quoted in Roniger and Kierszenbaum 2005: 13)

In general terms, there was little or no space to reflect publicly on the revolutionary experience of the 1970s from a critical but less condemnatory perspective. This lack of political space to speak about the revolutionary experience strongly influenced the few manifestations intended to shed a different light on this period. They could easily fall into the trap of idealization and omission of the more delicate and problematic dimensions of the experience. An issue that remained particularly difficult to treat was the option for armed struggle. In a compilation of testimonies on the women who had participated in the guerrilla organizations, the author stated: ‘…even though the theme of the armed actions was not the most central point that interested me, it ended up imposing itself as the only ambiguous point of the conversations. I mean that the theme was avoided “because it had not affected them”, “because it was in other areas”, etcetera’ (Diana 1996: 21). Diana made her interviews at the beginning of the 1990s. At that time many of the women she wanted to interview were still reluctant to talk. Reflecting on this fact, one of her interviewees states: ‘It is very difficult to talk about these things. We all have a lot of sorrows to bear. The partners, the friends, exile…’ (Diana 1996: 14). Thus the general context interacted with the personal situation of the protagonists, who were not necessarily ready to initiate a more public debate on their participation in the political process of the 1970s.

Recovering a voice and vindicating a story

From the mid-1990s onwards the number of publications, documentaries, or other products on the revolutionary organizations of the 1970s increased dramatically. Several of them, although not all, came from former militants. In 1995, a first documentary *Montoneros. Una historia*, from the thirty-five year old Andrés Di Tella, was shown on a small scale in

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207 This was exemplified in the supplement published in the newspaper *Sur* on the history of the Peronist Youth. Such a supplement was unusual for the period, and had to do with the characteristics of the newspaper. It was financed by the Communist Party, oriented towards the nationalist left, and several of its collaborators had adhered to the revolutionary left (among them were Eduardo L. Duhalde, David Viñas, Beatriz Sarlo, Horacio González and María Moreno). The publication of the history of the Peronist Youth was triggered by the presidential elections of 1989. The authors of the supplement clearly had the intention to revalorize the revolutionary experience within the Peronist movement. Therefore, the vision presented left little room for the unresolved debates related to the experience, such as the option for armed struggle and its deviations (Pittaluga and Oberti 2006: 103-8).
the Cultural Centre Ricardo Rojas. The documentary told the story of Ana, a member of the organization Montoneros and survivor of the ESMA. Her testimony was cross-cut with the memories of other former Montoneros. In 1996, a few days before the twentieth anniversary of the military coup, the earlier mentioned documentary Cazadores de Utopía went into première in a movie theatre in the city centre of Buenos Aires. It was a compilation of testimonies of former members of the Tendencia Revolucionaria within the Peronist movement, of which the director and his assistants had also been part. That same year, Marta Diana, herself not a former militant but a classmate of former Montonera Adriana Lesgart, published Mujeres guerrilleras, a compilation of testimonies of women who had been members of various revolutionary organizations. In 1997, Eduardo Anguita, former member of the PRT-ERP, and Martín Caparrós, former member of the Tendencia Revolucionaria, published the first of a series of three testimonial books on the revolutionary experience of the 1970s entitled La Voluntad. Una historia de la militancia revolucionaria.

These are some examples of publications and works on the revolutionary experience of the 1970s that were published in the second half of the 1990s. The stream of products on the revolutionary organizations continues today. This increasing attention for the subject was accompanied by reflections and debates in newspapers and journals, in academia and among the groups and organizations dealing with the recent past, and in which the voices of the former militants became increasingly important. Several elements, such as a new generation asking their elders to tell about their past experiences and the crisis of representative democracy, led former militants to break the silence. When they finally started to intervene in the public debate on the recent past, they did so with the explicit intention to confront dominant narratives of the 1970s. While this was a necessary step to break through existing stereotypes of the militants of the 1970s, it also conditioned the ways in which the experience was narrated. At the same time, the public contributions of former militants to the debate revealed multiple and sometimes contradictory memories of the revolutionary experience. This section deals with these diverse attempts of former militants to rewrite the history of the 1970s, showing how they wrestled as much with their own memories as with the dominant narratives they were seeking to deconstruct.

**Re-connecting with a past of militancy**

Several elements contributed to breaking the silence of former militants. One crucial factor has been the emergence of a new generation demanding information on the 1970s and questioning the silence of their elders. In the documentary Montoneros. Una historia, Ana states that it was her sixteen-year-old daughter who triggered her to speak about her experience when she asked: ‘Mom, what happened in the seventies?’ Similarly, Roberto, who was an adolescent during the military dictatorship, stated in an interview in 1995:

The lack of information gives the impression that there is a word missing. This word that is missing is that of those who also dreamt like them. It is the leg that’s missing from the table. We know what the military think, we know what Firmenich thinks, we know more or less what the people think, but we do not know what those who participated and disagreed think, those who at one point became critical. We do not know because it has not been published anywhere, nobody wrote a book and signed it. Here a debate is lacking between the generation that participated and our generation... (Gelman and LaMadrid 1997: 359)
In this context, the children of the disappeared played a particularly important role in breaking the silence of former militants. Many of them had grown up with little information on the militancy of their parents. They had generally been raised by their grandparents, or other relatives who did not necessarily know the details of the militancy of the disappeared person, or disagreed with their political choices and could not speak about it. It was often when they were in their teens, halfway through the 1990s, that children of the disappeared started to investigate who their parents were. They were not satisfied with the image that existed of their parents as merely passive victims, and wanted to understand who they had really been. Their interest ranged from the political choices that had motivated their parents to the more personal aspects such as what things they enjoyed doing and what they used to laugh about (Bonaldi 2006: 162). In an attempt to reconstruct their own family story, they contacted their parents’ fellow-militants, hoping to hear who their parents had been and how they had lived their short lives.

These demands coming from the children of the disappeared stimulated former militants, among them survivors of the secret detention centres, to tell more about their years of political militancy. It helped survivors to move beyond their role of witnesses of the horrors of torture and captivity in the secret detention centres. This was enhanced by the fact that the children of the disappeared generally approached survivors with less suspicions than many of the older relatives. At a more public level, the organization H.I.J.O.S. also contributed to creating a political space for former militants to be more explicit about their previous political identities. From its first public appearances, the organization systematically vindicated the disappeared as political militants. In one of the first public speeches of the organization at the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the military coup, the spokesperson of H.I.J.O.S. stated:

We are proud of our revolutionary parents, and we assume the commitment to continue for memory and justice until the ultimate consequences. Twenty years ago, companions, our parents decided to have us. They knew that maybe they would not see the victory, they would not see the country that they were building, and they wanted us to see it. Companions, how are we not going to vindicate them? (Quoted in Lorenz 2002: 87)

H.I.J.O.S. was not the first organization to insist on the political identity of the disappeared, but its message was powerful because of the public attention that the organization received.

The emergence of a new generation demanding a different story than the dominant discourses circulating until then also confronted former militants with their own silences. Dolores, a former militant, recalls how she became aware of the silence of her generation when she attended a demonstration on the Plaza de Mayo that brought together two generations of victims, the mothers and the children of the disappeared:

At this point in history there is a gap between two generations, the mothers and the children. That was very clear to me when we had a great demonstration in the Plaza de Mayo and the mothers and others were saying the same things they have been telling us for the last twenty years. The daughters and sons were trying to listen to another statement than that of their parents. And then we realized there is a whole generation that has been silent for all this time. My generation. (Quoted in Marchak 1999: 186)
In several publications of former militants who wrote about the 1970s, the demand of younger generations is presented as one of the motivations for writing about their experiences. In *Montoneros. La Resistencia después del final* (2004), former member of the *Juventud Universitaria Peronista* (JUP) Marisa Sadi quotes the earlier mentioned Roberto as a justification for her work. Similarly, in *No dejes que te la cuenten* (1997), former Montonero Ernesto Jauretche states that his book was written in the first place for the younger generations who are questioning the political conduct of their elders.

Other developments also importantly contributed to creating a space for former members of the revolutionary organizations to speak more openly about their experiences. The historical context in which H.I.J.O.S. vindicated the political struggles of their parents was one of growing disillusionment with democracy. This led to a questioning of the idea so strongly embraced in the 1980s that democracy was the panacea for Argentina's social, economic and political troubles. As a consequence, the rejection of the social and political protests of the 1970s as exclusively violent and destructive also started to crumble, permitting a revalorization of these experiences. The first signs of this revalorization were perceived halfway through the 1990s, particularly among some of the human rights organizations and groups organizing around the demands for truth, justice and memory. But it was in the context of the social, economic and political crisis of 2001 that the 1970s increasingly came to be referred to not only as a period of repression, but also of widespread social protest. More than vindicating specific organizations, what was revalorized was the idea that had been central in the struggles of the 1970s, that collective organization could lead to social change (Interview LP 27.09.2004).

The radical character of the revolutionary struggles of the 1970s made it the closest antecedent to the widespread anti-institutional manifestations of 2001-2002. This was also interpreted in this way by former militants, to whom the mobilizations of 2001-2002 brought back memories of the massive crowd mobilizations and excitement of the 1970s. Pablo, a former member of the PRT-ERP, compares the protests with the *Cordobazo* in 1969, a historical crowd mobilization staged jointly by workers and students in the city of Córdoba, and which marked the beginning of years of widespread social protest and guerrilla activity (Interview PL 22.10.2004). Felipe, former Montonero, compared the period from 2001 onwards with the period of 1973-76 in terms of the maelstrom of activities that characterizes both periods (Interview FC 28.11.2004). Eduardo, a former member of PRT-ERP, states that there is a relationship in the conceptualization of social and political reality between the

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208 The JUP was one of the grassroots organizations that carried out political activities for the Montoneros. These grassroots militants were made available through a strategic alliance of the Montoneros with the *Juventud Peronista* (Peronist Youth, JP) in 1972. Participation in the JP became the first step for many militants to inclusion into the Montoneros, and all activities carried out by the JP ultimately came to serve Montonero goals. After the elections of 1973, the Montoneros built different front organizations for their political work, through the creation of JPs at the universities (*Juventud Universitaria Peronista*, JUP), among secondary student unions (*Unión de Estudiantes Secundarios*, UES), among the Peronist workers (*Juventud Trabajadora Peronista*, JTP), shanty town dwellers (*Movimiento Villero Peronista*, MVP), and a feminine variant (*Asociación Evita*, AE), which all ultimately reported to Montoneros. Collectively these organizations came to be known as the *Tendencia Revolucionaria*, the Revolutionary Tendency within the Peronist movement, and it was through these organizations that the Montoneros were able to mobilize impressive numbers of people on the streets, at demonstrations and rallies (Gillespie 1982: 134-5; Marchak 1999: 96-98; Robben 2005).

209 See chapter three.
1970s and 2001-2002: ‘This is the seventies. In the political range of ideas there is a relation’ (Interview EA5 28.12.2004).

Concretely, the social protests of 2001 and 2002 stimulated many former militants to become politically involved again. Felipe participated in the protests of 19 and 20 December together with other former militants: ‘We participated on the 19th, the 20th. Many companions were there burning cars…the same Vaca Narvaja210 […] burning cars on the 9 de julio (a major avenue in Buenos Aires)’ (Interview FC 28.11.2004). In the months thereafter, the popular assemblies constituted a new political space outside political parties that strongly attracted former militants. According to Inés, a former Montonera, they contributed to reuniting former militants who had lost contact, and to reorganizing on the basis of previous political identities:

The popular and neighbourhood assemblies, this also gave way to the appearance of the setentistas (militants of the seventies)… And of much more social work, to open up more… And […] to start finding each other again…like mushrooms after the rain […] Before [the crisis of 2001] there was not such an evident thing, I am not saying that it was not there anywhere. Perhaps there were a lot of people like withdrawn in their work, in their profession, and this provided a space to reactivate things and to meet up with the others. (Interview IP 20.09.2004)

But what definitively permitted former militants to recover some of the public space they had lost after the dictatorship was the fact that during his presidency (2003-2007), Néstor Kirchner publicly recognized and vindicated his own participation in the JUP, a grassroots organization responding to the Montoneros. In doing this, Kirchner ‘whitewashed’ the experience of militancy of the 1970s, as Marisa formulates it:

He whitewashes when he says ‘I am the son of the Madres, I am…I participated, I was there.’ He whitewashes when he goes to the ESMA and embraces the survivors, who were all Montoneros, from the first one until the last one, from extremely well-trained and educated members (cuadros) to people that weren’t, but he does it. So there you also see it. He whitewashes when he starts inviting former Montoneros to the various [government] areas. (Interview MS2 19.10.2004)

On the importance of the presidential gestures, Noemí states: ‘It is like an obscure curtain was moved and like [for] some of those who had to do with the story of the 1960-70s, the fact that there is a President who had something to do with this story and has…it is quite a strong thing, which has left us all like a bit surprised’ (Interview NC 10.08.2003). The presidential gestures and statements strongly contributed to de-stigmatizing those who had been members of revolutionary organizations in the 1970s.

**Testimonies of the 1970s: between vindication and (self-) criticism**

Former militants have occupied the public space that emerged in the mid-1990s in several ways. In the different places they had rejoined socially, politically and culturally, they increasingly spoke up about their previous political identities, and insisted on the need to remember the disappeared as political militants. Disappeared or assassinated intellectuals, writers and artists like Rodolfo Walsh, Francisco ‘Paco’ Urondo or Héctor Oesterheld were

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210 One of the surviving leaders of Montoneros.
increasingly remembered as political militants instead of the focus being placed on their cultural legacy. Some former militants even explicitly tried to revive old political identities, although adapted to the new political context. An example of such an initiative is the Mutual Sentimiento, created in 1999 by former political prisoners, mostly former members of the PRT-ERP. The association states that it pursues the same political objectives that once motivated the revolutionary organizations of the 1970s, but with different means. In the words of the president, Graciela Draguicevich, ‘…here we are trying to continue with the same banners [of the PRT-ERP], but with other arms’ (Interview GD2 05.01.2005). Another similar initiative is the Movimiento Auténtico Peronista (MPA) founded by former Montoneros. The magazine of the MPA is called El Descamisado, the name given to Montoneros’ most important propaganda platform in the 1970s. This choice is representative for the level of vindication of the Montonero identity within the MPA, as also becomes clear from their founding document.211

One of the more visible means through which former militants occupied the political space that was opening up was through the production of books, documentaries and other cultural products on the subject. Many of these works had a strong testimonial character. These works had a ripple effect, and strongly contributed to the de-stigmatization of the revolutionary experience of the 1970s. They were clearly intended as a deconstruction of the narratives circulating at that time on the militant experience of the 1970s: the theory of the two devils, and the de-politicization of the victims of state terrorism (Oberti and Pittaluga 2006: 121). According to the authors of these works, these narratives had contributed to making the whole militant experience of the 1970s an undertaking that made no sense when viewed from the present. Through the voices of the protagonists who talked about their experiences, their motivations and their hopes and fears, they wanted to contribute to a different understanding of the militant experience of the 1970s. Furthermore, in order to go beyond the tragedy of the disappearances, they tried to rescue those elements that had been part of the militant experience but were generally omitted when referring to the 1970s: the joy involved in being engaged in politics, the feeling that one was shaping the course of history, and the thrill of the whole experience (Oberti and Pittaluga 2006: 127).

The intention to challenge the dominant narratives was explicit in the documentary Cazadores de Utopías, directed by David Blaustein. In an interview in Página/12, Blaustein explained that the documentary aimed at breaking with prevailing images of the 1970s: ‘I think that the film can act as a historical hinge between an image that was imposed for years and the true motives of my generation’.212 This alternative version of the militant experience of the 1970s contained various elements. In the first place, the documentary wanted to show that the militants of the 1970s had not been the ‘devils’ depicted in official history, but persons guided by ideals of social justice. This intention was clearly expressed in a comment by Blaustein on how the audience reacted to the documentary:

With satisfaction I received the comments of the young people that came out astonished or, at least, surprised with what they had seen. They realized that these people do not have anything to do with this role of ‘bad guys’ that a particular version of official history had attributed to them.

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211 See: http://www.eldescamisado.org/
212 Página/12, 20.03.1996.
Some told me that, easily, they would buy a second-hand car from them…implying that above all they understood that it is about sincere people, committed to what they believed at the time.\footnote{213} Simultaneously, it aimed at deconstructing the de-politicized image of the disappeared that predominated, as Mercedes Depino, co-scenario writer of the documentary, explained in an interview: ‘[We wanted] to show that this story was the project of a generation that was the decade of the seventies, where the aim was the transformation of society’ (quoted in Rodríguez 1999: 290). Finally, the documentary also aimed at constructing a version of the past that went beyond the tragedy of the disappearances and showed that the period of the 1970s had also been a time of excitement, passion and hope. Citing Blaustein again: ‘Let’s not give the feeling of the defeated, lets not give the feeling of tragedy, lets give the feeling that it made sense and that there is a future to conquer…’ (quoted in Rodríguez 1999: 304).

\textit{Cazadores de Utopías} was one of the first documentaries by former militants on their experience in the 1970s. Therefore, it both expressed and contributed to a change on how the experience of militancy of the 1970s was looked and reflected upon (Oberti and Pittaluga 2006: 119). A similar role could be attributed to the trilogy \textit{La Voluntad}, written by Martín Caparrós and Eduardo Anguita, and which gave an overview of the revolutionary experience covering the period from 1966 to 1978. The first of the three volumes, published in 1997, immediately became a bestseller. The three volumes were written as a novel but based on testimonies of former protagonists and documents of those years. Like \textit{Cazadores de Utopías}, the books were intended as a deconstruction of prevailing narratives, and particularly that of the theory of the two devils. One of the aims of the book was to make understandable to outsiders why numerous youngsters had opted for active participation in one of the guerrilla organizations, making a choice for armed struggle as a means to achieve social change. They chose for a focus on the personal stories of the militants, and particularly, on their emotional world, so as to create a different understanding of that period. Thus in Anguita’s words:

\ldots we thought that it had to have a gaze that was able to be surprised, to be moved, that is to say, that the narrative had to dwell on the stories that showed changes and that they had to show a tremulous soul, they had to show a surprised person, an indignant person, let’s say, it had to exaggerate from an emotional point of view those things that the cold history that had been told so far did not show, because at the time, it was more used for the rod of the good and the bad, violence and non-violence, whether these kids had been mistaken or not mistaken. (Interview EA5 28.12.2004)

These are but two examples of how former militants intended to break with the existing narratives, appealing to life stories and testimonies of the protagonists to give insights into some of the ideals, motivations and emotions involved in the militant experience of the 1970s. They contributed to a renewed attention for the militancy of the 1970s. Thus, sociologist Carlos Altamirano (1996: 1) stated that the main merit of \textit{Cazadores de Utopía} was that it encouraged a debate on the 1970s and particularly the Montoneros. At the same time, the interventions of former militants in the media and in other cultural settings also gave visibility to the great disparity of memories on this particular experience. Even when former militants shared a common will to shed a different light on the experience of the 1970s,
they could have almost incompatible explanations for the destruction of the revolutionary organizations, commonly referred to as la derrota (the defeat). A major dividing line ran between on the one hand those who attributed entire responsibility to the repression and the military dictatorship and continued to vindicate each one of the actions of the guerrilla, and on the other hand those who were more critical and also attributed responsibility to the decisions of the leadership of these organizations. These divergent explanations were strongly – although not exclusively – related to one’s position within the hierarchical structure of the revolutionary organizations. The most critical voices often came from those who had been involved in the grassroots organizations allied with the guerrillas, and who were taking part in political activities in the universities, neighbourhoods, secondary schools and factories, the so-called perejiles.214

Criticisms against the leadership were harshest among former members of the Montoneros. The leadership was criticized for prioritizing the military above the political, for sustaining a centralist and vertical decision-making process, and for taking decisions that isolated the organization from its political bases and exposed the lives of its members.215 Some measures were particularly controversial and are generally mentioned in this context as examples of the militaristic and authoritarian turn the organization took over the years, particularly from 1974 onwards. One of them was the assassination of the union leader and close collaborator of Perón, José Ignacio Rucci in September 1973,216 a measure that was harshly criticized, and is often considered the first sign of the growing militarization of the organization (Gillespie 1982; Bernetti and Giardanelli 2003; Calveiro 2005). Equally controversial was the decision of the leadership to go underground in September 1974, after the death of Perón, and to reinitiate military operations after a period of abstention that had started with Cámpora’s victory at the elections in May 1973 (Gillespie 1982: 174-5).217 The decision left thousands of grassroots militants unprotected because they could not easily go

214 The word perejiles was used to refer to the thousands of grassroots militants that carried out political activities for the guerrilla organizations. Depending on how and by whom it was used, it could either have a depreciative meaning, or be a means to vindicate this particular group of militants.

215 Similar criticisms also took place within the PRT-ERP. One difference was that the organization recognized its defeat a few years earlier than Montoneros. In July 1976, Roberto Santucho, the uncontested leader of the PRT-ERP, was assassinated. A year later, in April 1977, the organization declared that it had been defeated, and ordered the retreat of its members into exile (Robben 2005: 157). Montoneros would not dissolve until 1981.

216 Rucci’s assassination was intended to force Perón to recognize the Montoneros as a powerful actor within the Peronist movement in a context of growing polarization between left- and right-wing Peronism. The operation, which was not assumed publicly, was strongly criticized internally at the time. It was a measure taken in a democratic context, against an ally of Perón, and could not count on any support within the Peronist movement (Anguita and Caparrós 1998a: 184-94).

217 In practice they continued to realize operations to provide them with capital reserves, such as the abduction of businessmen and the disarming of policemen, as well as operations of so-called ‘popular justice’. These consisted of assassinating persons who had been in the repression against members of their organization, or of union leaders considered to be representative of right-wing Peronism, as was the case of Rucci. Other victims were the leader of the Builders Union Rogelio Coria, Builder Union bodyguard Felix Navazo, Lamusse’s Interior Minister Mor Roig, and ultra-right CNU leader Martin Salas. Navazo had been identified as one of those who participated in the Ezcurra shootings in 1973 and was known to be engaged in para-police activity in La Plata, Mor Roig had been in office at the time of the Trelew massacre in 1972, and Coria and Rucci were accused of being traitors to Peronism and the working class. These were but some of the actions carried out by Montoneros while Perón was still alive (Gillespie 1982: 165-6).
underground: they had a job, a family, and no means to live a clandestine life. The measure revealed a great indifference on the part of the leadership for this category of militants. It also isolated the organization from its political bases, and as such it was considered symptomatic for the militarization of the leadership, which increasingly favoured armed operations above constructing politics from below.

At the time, many of these decisions were intensely discussed within the organization. Communities in exile also conducted heated debates on these issues. Underlying the disputes was an internal struggle between those sectors who believed that arms stood above politics and those who believed that arms should always be subsumed to politics. This led to several splits until the dissolution of the Montoneros in 1983. In general, dissident voices were hardly taken into account by the leadership. This was clear when in the course of 1976 a strong dissidence developed among one sector of the Montoneros, the Greater Buenos Aires North Column (Columna Norte) and in the city of La Plata. Columna Norte alone represented nine hundred Montoneros. However, the national leadership trivialized the dissidence and presented it as ‘classist, ideologist and militarist’ (Gillespie 1982: 242–3).

Similarly, between 1976 and 1977 Rodolfo Walsh, respected intellectual and member of the intelligence service of Montoneros, wrote several internal documents in which he urged the leadership to make a less triumphant analysis of the historical context and to protect what was left of the organization (Sadi 2004: 21–6). The response of the leadership to Walsh’s documents was to plan two ‘counter-offensives’, in 1979 and 1980, which involved the return of militants in exile to Argentina to organize the resistance against the dictatorship. Both operations led to the disappearance of almost all its participants, including several members of the leadership.

In the public interventions of former militants from mid-1990s onwards, these issues appeared time and again as the unsolved themes of the Montonero experience. Contributing to the difficulties to come to terms with these aspects of the experience has been the lack of critical reflection among the surviving members of the leadership on their own role. In their public interventions they recognized some ‘political errors’ but refused to assume responsibilities for the consequences of several of their decisions. When asked why the organization did not invest more human and economic resources into preserving the lives of the members of the organization, Firmenich answered:

Our strategy was not to save people. If we had had that strategy, we would not even have started. The strategy was to transform the power structure in Argentina, not to save people. From the point of view of preservation we did everything that was possible. But one thing is the point of view of Amnesty International, which is a humanitarian organization, and another one is that of a revolutionary organization.

Similarly, Montonero leader Roberto Perdía explained how the leadership made a clear choice, when they went underground in 1974, not to financially support the thousands

219 See also Larraquy and Caballero 2000 and Anguita and Caparrós 1998b for more details on the dissidence of Columna Norte.
220 See Zuker 2003 and Larraquy 2006 for a history of the counteroffensives.
of grassroots militants at the periphery of the organization: ‘We could not assign so much money to this project, it would have left us without funds to engage in politics, and on the other hand, many of these five thousand militants would have gone abroad to badger us (rompiendo las pelotas) in exile’ (Larraquy and Caballero 2000: 276).

The lack of critical reflection of the surviving leaders on their own practices, and controversial attitudes such as the support for Menem’s candidacy in 1989 and the participation in his first government (Gorbato 1999: 327) all strongly contributed to a rejection of many former Montoneros of their leadership. These former militants also felt a strong need to stress to a public that had mainly heard the story through the surviving leadership that they were not representative for the militant experience of the 1970s. This argument was repeatedly invoked in a debate that was initiated after the publication of an unauthorized biography of Rodolfo Galimberti in 2000, written by two journalists who had not taken part in any militancy in the 1970s. Galimberti had been the leader of the Peronist Youth in 1972 and had been close to the leadership of Montoneros. He had also been representative of the more militaristic current within the organization. In the 1990s he became allied with Menemism and openly befriended a well-known torturer of the ESMA (Larraquy and Caballero 2000). In the media he was frequently cited as a bad example of what had become of the former revolutionaries of the 1970s. The publication of his biography initiated a debate in Página/12 on the militant experience of the 1970s, in which former militants were the main contributors. In several of these interventions, the authors stated that Galimberti was not representative for the militants of the 1970s, either because the experience was collective and could not be reduced to individuals such as Galimberti and others, or because most militants, particularly at the grassroots level, had shown very different attitudes.

In this context, the grassroots militants who had been involved in political activities rather than armed actions, but were also part of the revolutionary experience, emerged as the ideal counterpart to the militaristic leadership that had valued armed struggle more than politics. Both former militants and others who wrote on the subject in a critical way repeatedly insisted on the fact that the voices that should be heard were not those of the leadership, but those, still invisible, of the grassroots militants. They were considered the ‘real means of support of the revolutionary project’, those who, according to philosopher Feinmann, ‘took the responsibility. They believed in communitarian causes. They sought a better society. They did not die for being stupid. They did not die for nothing. They died for being generous’ (Feinmann 1998: 103). Clearly, there was a need to vindicate this particular group, which had experienced a different reality from that of the leadership and from those higher in the hierarchy of the organization. Adriana Robles, former grassroots militant, wrote a book significantly entitled, Perejiles. Los otros Montoneros (2004), revisiting her own memories and telling the stories of former fellow-militants, mostly members of the Unión de Estudiantes

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222 Galimberti broke with the Montoneros in 1979, together with another leader of the organization, Juan Gelman, and they founded the movement of Montoneros Auténticos later renamed in Peronismo en la Resistencia (Bernetti and Giardanelli 2003: 64).
223 Mario Wainfeld, ‘Cuando el coro era protagnista’, Página/12, 21.01.2001; Alicia Pierini, ‘Debatir la historia, no sobre personas’, Página/12, 18.02.2001;
Secundarios (UES). In her introduction, Robles insists upon the need to show ‘the other Montoneros’, the *perejiles*, the less formed and less informed basis of the politico-military organizations. The unknown, those who many do not know who they were’ (Robles 2004: 16), those who remained in the shadows and occupied lower ranks.

The need to vindicate this category of militant was also explicit in Marisa Sadi’s book *Montoneros. La resistencia después del final* (2004), on the handful of militants, including herself and her husband, who continued to carry out militant actions in Argentina during the dictatorship. At the same time, more than Robles, Sadi was writing against the leadership. Indignation about the attitude of the leadership, and their lack of recognition for what the grassroots militants had gone through was one of her main incentives to write the book. Indeed, she decided to write her story after the publication of several books that focussed on the experience of the higher ranking Montoneros, among them the biography on Galimberti (2000) and Miguel Bonasso’s autobiographical *Diario de un clandestino* (2000). Of Galimberti’s book she says: ‘When I read it for the first time I thought it was disgusting, this book. […] I thought it degraded everything…’ (Interview MS2 19.10.2004). Bonasso’s autobiography made her indignant for a different reason. Bonasso had been a high ranking Montonero who had lived underground in Argentina for several years while being supported financially by the organization, and according to Sadi, the book was not representative at all of what she and other grassroots militants had gone through during the dictatorship. Recalling her indignation at the time the book came out, she states: ‘…here I got completely cracked up. I said: “It is not fair! It is not fair that history is distorted in this way”. The issue is that *El diario de un clandestino* made me so furious because I think it is most remote from the reality that we went through’ (Interview MS2 19.10.2004). This motivated her to tell her own story.

Those who contrasted the grassroots militants with the leadership did not only want to vindicate this category of militants but also aimed at constructing a different narrative of the experience of the 1970s. They wanted to go beyond the image installed through the theory of the two devils and the public manifestations of their former leaders, to show who the militants had really been. However, when establishing a dichotomy between leaders and the grassroots militants, they were, in a way, reproducing the moral logic of the theory of the two devils. Thus, according to historian Federico Lorenz:

> When facing the criticisms, many responded by reinforcing a stereotyped image, differentiating themselves but reproducing the dominant logic. If the guerrilla, for instance, was synthesized in some of its leaders, the answer consisted of testimonies to show that ‘we were not them’, ‘we were not all like that’. But ultimately one was confronting [criticasters] using the framework proposed by the dualism of the two demons.227

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226 She criticized the fact that on several occasions Bonasso disregarded the security measures required to protect himself and those militants who fell under his responsibility. Furthermore, she was also extremely critical of the hierarchies within the organization between grassroots militants and higher ranking members of the organization, and which was reflected in the difference in financial means at their disposal. Whereas Bonasso could still lead a rather normal life thanks to money that was sent to him by the leadership on a regular basis, other militants less directly connected to the leadership had excruciating financial problems (Interview MS2, 19.10.2004).

Similarly, Oberti and Pittaluga (2006: 99) have warned for the consequence of a memory based on a dichotomy in which militancy stood for positive values, whereas the negative aspects of the experience were attributed to the leaders. According to them, it did not enable the exploration of the politico-military organizations as the complex political and subjective entities that they were, and therefore could lead to uncritical memories. Many former militants continued to reflect upon the past in moral terms, condemning or idealizing attitudes of former companions and their leaders, instead of analysing the experience as a historical process. This contributed to reinforcing taboos on the more controversial dimensions of the militant experience of the 1970s instead of leading to a better understanding of the past.

**Searching for a third way: the analytical perspective**

Increasingly, some former militants who saw the limitations of the normative terms in which the debate was unfolding started to plead for a more analytical perspective. They urged for a balance of the experience that would not fall into the trap of condemning or idealizing attitudes of former companions, and would not silence the more controversial issues that could contribute to the existing negative public image of the militant experience of the 1970s. Philosopher Ricardo Forster (1996: 54) described this challenge in the following terms:

> To travel through the sixties and seventies, to focus on the intensities of a period full of opportunities and dangers, means to refrain from justificatory gestures without these becoming, as some sectors of the left point out, traitors of memory, hypocritical gravediggers of the redeeming ideals for which some of the best members of that generation gave their lives.

Forster urged former militants to take up the challenge. In 2004, he reiterated his call for a critical revision of the revolutionary experience that managed to go beyond mystification while at the same time avoiding the condemnatory discourse conveyed through the theory of two devils (Forster 2004).

In 1996, when Forster insisted for the first time on the need for a critical discussion, the debate on the militant experience was merely starting, and there was little interest among former militants to discuss the more delicate topics publicly. Lila, a former Montonera who had been involved in some of the first initiatives to organize a public debate on the militant experience of the 1970s, remembers how difficult it was to discuss its more controversial aspects at the beginning of the 1990s. She recalls that at the time, many militants strongly criticized the documentary *Montoneros. Una historia*, for speaking openly about issues that ‘nobody would say’, such as the fact that abducted militants released names under torture, suspicions circulating against Firmenich, etc. (Interview LP 27.09.2004). In 2004, when Forster reiterated his call, the situation had slightly changed, and there were signs of a growing willingness on the part of former militants to be more openly critical about the militant experience. Both an expression of and a contribution to this debate was the journal *Lucha armada en la Argentina*, launched in 2004, and dedicated exclusively to the analysis of the experience of armed struggle as it had unfolded in Argentina in the 1960s and ’70s. The journal was a joint initiative of Sergio Bufano, former militant of the *Organización Comunista Poder Obrero* (OCPO), a Marxist guerrilla organization, and Gabriel Roth, a researcher of the *Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas en la Argentina* (CEDINCI), an archive of the Argentine left. The journal was meant as a platform...
for former militants, academics and public intellectuals, to enable critical reflection upon the revolutionary experience of the 1970s.

In the first issue, Bufano and Roth defined their intentions. They stated that the experience of armed struggle still awaited a critical historical evaluation free from prejudices, and which would acknowledge the political richness of the experience. They pointed to the fact that until then, reflection on the topic had tended to be self-legitimizing, reducing the revolutionary experience to stereotypes, anecdotes and mystifications. According to them, the lack of critical perspective imposed a mould in which justification replaced the analysis of the circulation of ideas, obscured the internal life of the organizations and the theoretical assumptions, the conflicts and tensions that emerged from them. It is well known that without a critical interpellation, without contrasting between what is said and what is done, history becomes a legitimizing instrument for an uncritical memory that lacks reflection.228

Their proposal was based on the belief that viewing the acts of the past from a critical perspective that would recover both the good and the bad things would help to avoid being either too indulgent or too demeaning towards the recent past. According to them, the main characters of that particular historical experience ‘should not be afraid of opening up memories and reviewing the strategies and sayings of the past. Recovering that which can be recovered and recognizing the errors’.229 Lucha Armada became an important platform for former militants, historians and others interested in reflecting upon the 1970s. The journal, which appears every three months, is often accompanied by a public presentation.

One of the persons who made several contributions to Lucha armada and has been highly influential in the development towards a more analytical reflection on the militant experience of the 1970s was Pilar Calveiro. Pilar Calveiro had been a member of Montoneros, and was a survivor of several secret detention centres, among them the ESMA. After being liberated, she went into exile in Mexico, from where she started to intervene in the debate in Argentina from the end of the 1990s onwards. Her first publication, Poder y desaparición. Los campos de concentración en Argentina, which appeared in 1998, was one of the first serious attempts to analyse the repressive system in Argentina not as an aberration, but as a product of Argentine society. It also went beyond the dichotomies between ‘heroes’ and ‘traitors’ that were still frequently applied to survivors who had collaborated or simulated collaboration while being detained (Pastoriza 2004: 57). These insights were elaborated further in Calveiro’s second book, Política y/o violencia. Una aproximación a la guerrilla de los años 70 (2005a), dedicated to an analysis of the guerrilla organizations and their role in the process that led to the military dictatorship. The book was also accompanied by a number of public presentations, which indicated, according to Oberti and Pittaluga (2006: 41), that ‘its appearance constituted an opportunity to install new coordinates in relation to the debate on the organizations of the seventies’.

In her analysis of the guerrilla movement, Calveiro developed several arguments that offered former militants new parameters to re-examine the militant experience without falling into either demonization or idealization. In the first place, instead of speaking about the past in moral terms, she pleaded for an analysis of the 1970s as a political process. Thus

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228 Lucha armada 1, 2004: 2.
229 Lucha armada 1, 2004: 2.
she stated: ‘It is not about one, two or twenty-five million demons; it is about understanding what happened, that is to say, what happened to us, to all of us, from the place each one of us occupied and still occupies’ (Calveiro 2005a: 13). Similarly, in an earlier interview, she stated: ‘I always thought that it was a political story, that entailed a lot of personal dramas, but that was essentially political and that we had to tell it from the political point of view, talk about the military project and its confrontation with the armed organizations’.230 Analysing the 1970s as a political process permitted her to free the recent history from the moralizing perspective through which it had often been interpreted. It also allowed her to construct a memory that would be able to reconnect the individual and private memories constructed by relatives of the disappeared with the broader political process they were part of. It would make it possible to go beyond the individual stories and anecdotes.

This emphasis on analysing the experience of the 1970s as a political process also created room for evaluating the role of the guerrilla organizations and their possible contribution to a general climate of violence that culminated in the military dictatorship, one of Calveiro’s central preoccupations. The guerrilla, she argued, had been a ‘phenomenon that was inseparable from this history and of great prominence’ (Calveiro 2005a: 13), and she considered that it was absolutely necessary to reflect upon the role and responsibility of the guerrilla organizations in the political process that led to state terrorism. According to her, this reflection should be realized in the first place by those who had been protagonists of this political experience. Thus the surviving leadership, as well as each individual militant, had the responsibility to reflect upon their attitudes and choices in the 1970s. However, few former militants had dared to reconsider their own responsibilities critically, out of fear of confirming the theory of the two devils, or because, as one former militant expressed it, ‘there is a profound fear of losing one’s identity’.231 The political perspective offered Calveiro a means to go beyond these limitations. She insisted on the fact that rather than speaking of a ‘self-criticism’ or a ‘mea culpa’, one should speak of a political balance. Thus she stated: ‘I do not believe in mea culpas – whether these are cathartic or catastrophistic – but I do believe in the possibility to sincerely understand the past to “open” the future’ (Calveiro, 2005a: 13). In one of her presentations she clarified: ‘I would not use the word “self-criticism”. I believe that what we have to do is make political evaluations’.232

This exercise should start with ‘re-historicizing the past’, as one of the chapters of her book was entitled. This meant analysing the revolutionary organizations of the 1970s in their particular historical context. In the 1960 and ‘70s, the world was organized according to the bipolar logic of the Cold War. The constellation in which the guerrilla had emerged was ‘a constellation of spaces and values that vindicate the state, the public and politics as possible principles of universality. They accepted the struggle, the confrontation and the revolution as a means, not the only ones, which were valid and valuable for politics’ (Calveiro 2005a: 14–5). This was opposed to the constellation that emerged from the end of the 1980s onwards, in which civil society and the private sphere were valorized in opposition to the state and the political system, which were, in Calveiro’s (2005a: 15) words, ‘almost always demonized’. In this new constellation ‘one vindicates agreements, and with a certain hypocrisy, condemns any form of open violence, especially political violence’ (Calveiro 2005a: 15). Without taking into

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230 Página/12, 01.11.1998.
231 Conference Pilar Calveiro at the UTPBA, Fieldnotes 17.08.2004.
232 Conference Pilar Calveiro at the UTPBA, Fieldnotes 17.08.2004.
account these differences, the actions of the militants of the 1970s were 'incomprehensible or even insane – even for themselves' (Calveiro 2005a: 16). Re-historicizing the past also meant recognizing the defeat of the guerrillas in Argentina as part of a more general defeat of the revolutionary initiatives that had burgeoned in the 1960 and ’70s throughout Latin America.

The insistence on understanding the experience of the 1970s in its specific historical context was not in itself new. However, the more testimonial approaches that had predominated until then mainly focussed on the sentiments and ideals that had motivated the generation of the 1970s. They did not provide an analysis of where these sentiments came from, how they were embedded in a particular set of values, and what this meant for the way social protest unfolded in the 1970s. Calveiro's intervention was also different from earlier proposals because she insisted on the fact that although the defeat of the guerrillas had been part of a broader historical process, this could not be used as an excuse. The guerrilla organizations also had their share of responsibility in their own defeat, and this responsibility should be acknowledged and evaluated. In this context, Calveiro was particularly critical of those former militants who tended to use the theory of the two devils as a means to avoid reflecting critically upon their own role. Referring to an interview with Firmenich in which he affirmed that the theory of the two devils had been one of the instruments used after the transition to democracy to ostracize the Montoneros, she stated: ‘…they mix up the dirty war with the demand for accountability that people claim and that he (Firmenich) should give. He also uses the theory of the two devils to wash his hands of his share of responsibility’ (Calveiro 2005a: 22-3).

Calveiro achieved success among former militants who shared her perspective. They welcomed her interventions as ‘a leap in the discussion' (Interview LP 27.09.2004). However, the theory of the two devils continued to cloud the debate. Criticisms against the revolutionary organizations were often seen as a confirmation of the theory, and therefore many former militants were afraid of being misunderstood if they spoke publicly about the most controversial decisions and practices of their organizations. According to Lila, one of the persons who have promoted Calveiro’s ideas in Argentina, the theory of the two devils was often used to put a stop to these discussions. She recalls several meetings where the audience questioned more critical reflections on the militant experiences, stating that this served to reproduce the theory of the two devils (Interview LP 27.09.2004). This mechanism became obvious during the presentation of the first issue of Lucha Armada. Sergio Bufano, one of the four speakers, pleaded for a more analytical approach to the guerrilla movement that would not avoid discussing the more controversial topics. Reacting to his presentation, one of the persons in the audience immediately accused him of re-implementing the theory of the two devils, thus cutting short the debate before it had even started. 233

The sensitivity to the theory of the two devils was reinforced when judge Bonadío ordered the arrest of the three surviving leaders of the Montoneros in 2003, accusing them of being responsible of the abduction of fifteen Montoneros who had returned to Argentina in the context of the second counteroffensive in 1980.234 Former militants interpreted his move as a means of re-floating the theory of the two devils and became even more cautious about what they said and what they did not say. Marisa Sadi, who was about to publish her book on the

234 Veintitres, 21.08.03; Página/12, 11.09.2003.
Montoneros, remembers that Bonadío’s arrest order ‘pestered her a lot’. When I asked her why, she answered:

The demons. The demons, the demons. Then there were people who said to me: ‘It can not come out, it can not come out, […] because the demons, because…’ The matter was complicated. I came across a much generalized attitude among the people I interviewed. They told you everything but in general the majority clarified ‘you can tell this, and this you can not, you have to be careful, be aware because this can not come out, we are not prepared’…things that sincerely…well, I have had some time bombs, like that, let’s say, but in general it was information that not…of which I do not believe that it was something to say ‘this is something that can not be told’. I was very respectful. But there is this fear on the part of the ones who participated that we will not be understood. (Interview MS2 19.10.2004)

Thus, although there were several attempts to reflect more critically on the revolutionary project of the 1970s, it still remained difficult for former militants to speak openly about its more controversial aspects.

**Broadening the debate to ‘outsiders’**

The debate on the militant experience of the 1970s was not limited to former militants, although they were major contributors. ‘Outsiders’, persons who had never had any participation in the militant experience of the 1970s, or who had sympathized with, and later distanced themselves from their previous political identities, also increasingly intervened in the discussion. *Lucha Armada* for instance was a joint initiative by a former militant and a historian who had been too young to be politically active in the 1970s. Many of the authors in the journal had not themselves been militants. Similarly, in the newspaper *Página/12*, one of the platforms in which the debate on the militant experience unfolded, younger generations also participated in the discussion. In *Puentes*, a magazine exclusively dedicated to the memory of the repression, contributions came from human rights activists and former militants, but also from academics and journalists who had not been members of the guerrilla organizations of the 1970s. The militant experience of the 1970s was also discussed in *Punto de Vista*, and *Conflines*, journals that offered a platform for intellectuals to reflect upon a wide range of social, political and cultural topics. Finally, outsiders also participated in the debate through publications and other cultural products, such as documentaries and movies. Several of these products came from children of disappeared, but this was not always the case. Many young film directors or historians without a personal story of repression were also becoming increasingly interested in the subject.235

Many of these outsiders were critical of the testimonial approach that predominated in the renewed attention for the 1970s. They considered these interventions nostalgic and idealized forms of reflecting upon the past. *Cazadores de Utopías* for instance, received numerous criticisms from individuals who had not participated in the revolutionary experience of the

235 Among them were the publications of Lucas Lanusse 2005; Vera Carnovale with several articles on the PRT-ERP; Oberti and Pittaluga 2006; and documentaries such as *Montoneros. Una historia*, of Guido Di Tella and Trelew (2004), of director Mariana Arruti.
1970s. It was criticized for failing to explain anything, and for speaking a language that was shared only by those who had participated in the experience. Thus one journalist stated: ‘Cazadores…does not explain, it moves. It does not clarify, it remembers. It is, in this sense, a period film, one that appeals to feelings, but that also requires knowledge, which, for different reasons pertain to a specific generation’.236 Similarly, sociologist Carlos Altmarino (1996: 1) stated that: ‘The work of Blaustein-Jauretche is not, nor has it been made with the intention of being, an instrument of reflection. It is a movie to mourn, made by ex-Montoneros for ex-Montoneros’. Journalist Gabriela Cerruti stated that the documentary systematically failed to analyse the events narrated. It failed to produce answers to the more controversial aspects of the experience, such as the decision to go underground, the counteroffensive, or the choice for political violence as a means to achieve social change. In her concluding remarks, Cerruti stated: ‘For many of those who felt actors in those years, Cazadores de Utopía is a self-tribute, the movie that “we owed ourselves”. Maybe now that they have settled this debt with themselves the moment has come to find a slightly less passionate and partial way to help us – we, the others – to understand this history’.237

Thus there were important differences between the ways former militants – in all their diversity – remembered the revolutionary experience of the 1970s, and how many outsiders did. These differences had much to do with the ideological point of departure of both groups, and with whether they approached the past as an object of study or as an experience that might still prove to have political value for the present. In the first case, the focus lay on deconstructing existing myths while in the second case, the focus was on how past experiences could strengthen political identities in the present. In the following sections, I will show how these differences played out. The first section describes the perspective of those outsiders who have adopted a critical position towards the militant experience of the 1970s. These are typically persons who have not themselves participated in that experience or who have distanced themselves from past political choices. I will then show how their perspective differed from that of former militants who vindicated their previous political identities, even when they were critical of that experience. I will do this by contrasting the outsiders’ perspective with the position of former militants on two central issues of debate: the choice for political violence as a means to achieve social change, and the question concerning what to recover from the past experiences for the needs of the present. Finally, this section will close with a discussion of aspects of the political experience of the 1970s that, due to the strong focus in the public debate on the experience of the politico-military organizations, have received less attention and are now increasingly being raised by historians.

The outsiders’ perspective: was it worth it?
Outsiders expressed their uneasiness with what they saw as idealized forms of remembering the 1970s in different ways. One current of criticism came from members of younger generations who were searching for different ways of reflecting upon the past. They wanted to raise new questions and deconstruct some of the myths about that particular experience. This was explicit in Papá Iván (2000), an autobiographic documentary realized by María Inés Roqué on her father, Juan Julio Roqué, founding member of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR) and a well known Montonero leader who was assassinated in 1977.

236 Página/12, 20.03.1996.
237 Página/12, 07.04.1996.
Taking a letter she received from her father when he decided to go underground as a point of departure, María Inés Roqué explored his life and questioned some of the choices he made. She openly wondered how one could combine a family life and intense political activity in a guerrilla organization, a question she ended up finding no answers to. Her voice-over in the film revealed her ambivalent feelings towards the militancy of her father, an issue that still remains difficult for children of former militants to admit publicly. She also broke the silence surrounding the issue of collaboration of some of the detained-disappeared by letting Miguel Angel Lauletta, a survivor of the ESMA, appear in her film. Lauletta had collaborated actively with the marines and was accused in Miguel Bonasso’s *Recuerdo de la muerte* of having celebrated the death of Roqué with a toast in the ESMA. Within the human rights community he was generally not considered an authoritative voice to speak about the ESMA and about other fellow detainees. In several ways, María Inés Roqué’s documentary revealed a refreshing detachment from the established canons on the story of the 1970s.238

Roqué questioned some of the basic assumptions and decisions of her father and, by extension, of his generation. However, she did this in the traditional framework of testimonies and stories told by protagonists. Albertina Carri’s, *Los Rubios* (2003), challenged even these forms of representation. *Los rubios* (The blond ones), were her disappeared parents, the prominent intellectuals and former Montoneros Roberto and Ana María Carri. More than a movie about her parents, it was an exploration of how to narrate their absence. She chose to do this in an unconventional way, making her personal search for memories of her parents the core of the film. Thus the movie shows an actress representing Albertina Carri walking in the neighbourhood where Albertina had lived, and films her talking with neighbours who remembered her parents. Scenes of daily life with her parents and their abduction are represented using Playmobil figures. The making of the film is part of the story. She shows her own vacillations and doubts about the film, and includes scenes in which the actress has to repeat the same line several times. Throughout the movie, Carri confronts the discourse of the generation of her parents in several ways. On various occasions, her voice-over questions their one-dimensional discourse. The hesitations, the rehearsals and doubts she expresses throughout the film were another means to differentiate herself from her parents, who were a part of a generation of discursos enteros (one-track discourses).239 Fragments of interviews with former companions of militancy of her parents are interrupted halfway or drowned by other noises. Reflecting in voice-over on the testimonies of the former companions of militancy of her parents, she states that these stories did not help her because they only spoke of her parents in terms of heroic, idealized persons. In this sense, Carri’s movie is both an attempt to break with what she considered the dominant forms of remembering, the testimonial approach, and with the idealized memories of the generation of the 1970s.240

From a different perspective, several academics and public intellectuals also criticized the forms of remembering the experience of the 1970s. Some of them had themselves been militants in the 1970s, but had distanced themselves from their previous political sympathies and now positioned themselves as outsiders. They were critical of what they saw as a selective revival of the past for the political needs of the present, which they considered far remote

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238 See also: Página/12, 29.07.2004.
239 Showing of *Los Rubios* and debate, IV Conference of Faculty of Sociology of the University of Buenos Aires, Fieldnotes, 21.10.2004.
from historical truth. The public vindication of former President Kirchner and his wife of their own militant experience was seen as particularly illustrative of this mechanism. Thus, according to Beatriz Sarlo: ‘…the decade of the seventies has had an imaginary recycling in Kirchnerismo through the idea of a juvenile militancy that was committed to transformation, and of which the President and his wife would feel a part. This has nothing to do with historical truth, but rather with the kind of political identification they have made’. Similarly, Carlos Altamirano stated that Kichner and his wife appealed to a purified version of the past that responded to the political needs of the present:

I think it is important to clarify that the version of the ‘70s (of Kirchner) is a version that relates more to memory and identity than to effective history. It is a current that connects with its past and produces a remembering of this past around this view in which, for example, Firmenich has no place at all. It is a stylized and polished version. It is aimed at the constitution of an identity, and therefore has an important symbolic value.

These mechanisms, they argued, operated even in those cases in which former militants wanted to present a more nuanced version of the past. According to Hugo Vezzetti (2002: 203), these interventions systematically revealed what he called ‘a defensive operation aimed at relieving the group from the major and uncertain task of reconstructing an identity, and above all, at elaborating the less acceptable, painful, and even offensive aspects of the own participation’. He criticized the testimonial approach to the past that predominated, for it did not permit the critical distance necessary to debate what elements should be preserved and handed down to future generations (Vezzetti 2002: 203). Beatriz Sarlo considered that the fact that the protagonists of the decade of revolutionary protest were still alive made it very difficult to come to a more objective understanding of the past. Criticizing the mechanisms that led former militants to ignore the most disturbing aspects of the previous political experiences, she pleaded for more openness about what the revolutionary projects entailed: ‘For me the operation of bad faith would be to not say that they put a bomb under the bed of Paula Lambruschini, who was fifteen years old, because we will never understand the past if we make this kind of omissions’. Only a detached and dispassionate approach to the past would make it possible to come to a historical account that was closer to historical truth.

The interventions of these academics were part of a broader debate on the political causes of the repression and particularly on the role of civil actors in the process that led to the military dictatorship, with the guerrilla organizations being one of these actors. This topic started to receive attention from academia from the second half of the 1990s. Historian Hilda Sábato was one of the first to call for such a debate. In an article published in Punto de Vista in 1994, she argued that the issue of collective responsibility, understood not as collective guilt, but, following Habermas, as a ‘collective responsibility with regard to the mental and cultural context in which the massive crimes were possible’ (Sábato 1994: 31) had

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241 For examples see chapter six.
243 Página/12, 17.02.2004.
244 Paula Lambruschini was the daughter of Vice-Admiral Lambruschini, a target of the Montoneros in 1978 for his responsibility in the secret detention centre ESMA. On 1 August 1978, the Montoneros placed a bomb in his home, killing his fifteen-year-old daughter (Robben 2005: 163).
245 Página/12, 25.09.2005.
been almost absent from public reflection on the past. In August 2000, Sábato reiterated her call in the magazine *Puentes*. A few months later, in March 2001, historian Luis Alberto Romero urged historians to write and investigate on the political causes of the repression: ‘It is about time that the historians started talking’, he wrote in the newspaper *Clarín*. He insisted on the fact that ‘the demon did not come from outside; it was incubated among us’. A sign of the growing interest in the subject was the fact that the antecedents of the dictatorship constituted one of the central themes at the Second International Encounter on the Construction of Collective Memory in the city of La Plata in August 2001 attended by well-known national and international academics and human rights activists. It was also the main subject of a book by Hugo Vezzetti published in 2002, *Pasado y presente. Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina*.

In this debate on the antecedents of the dictatorship, these intellectuals were extremely critical of the guerrilla, and attributed a major role to these organizations in installing a culture of violence and fear that paved the way for the military dictatorship. In this sense, their analysis recalls the first academic publications on the topic that appeared in the 1980s. Vezzetti systematically spoke of ‘insurgent terrorism’ to refer to the guerrilla organizations. Carlos Altamirano and Luis Alberto Romero both argued that the guerrilla contributed to installing a society of fear that permitted the acceptance of high levels of repression after the military coup (Romero 2001; Altamirano 2001). Carlos Altamirano (2001: 49) also deconstructed the frequently used argument that guerrilla violence emerged only because of a lack of pluralism and democratic culture in the 1970s. According to him, the guerrilla also emerged because of a deep and uncompromising belief in the revolution, inspired by Guevarism and the Cuban Revolution: ‘Only the Revolution – that was the belief – would bring social regeneration and would allow, piece by piece, another world, that of the liberated people and the new man to be built’. He also argued that although the Doctrine of National Security was invented before the guerrilla movement emerged in Argentina, guerrilla actions did contribute to its revival (Altamirano 2001: 49).

In general terms, these intellectuals concluded that there was little or nothing to recover from the militant experience of the 1970s, which they saw as militaristic, hierarchic, anti-democratic, and anti-political. They considered that the use of violence to achieve social change, a central dimension of the guerrilla experience, was extremely problematic. This vision was exposed clearly in an analysis by Claudia Hilb (2001) on political violence and the guerrilla movement in Argentina. Drawing on theoretical insights from Hannah Arendt, she distinguished two forms of violence: reactive violence and instrumental violence. Reactive violence referred to massive protests such as the *Cordobazo*, in which broad sectors of the population reacted out of impotence; feeling that there were no other means left to express their discontent. Rationalized or instrumental violence, on the contrary, was premeditated: it was a means to achieve a goal. Its proposal was to be a substitute for politics, rather

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246 Exceptions were, according to her, Tulio Halperín Donghi’s *La larga agonía de la Argentina peronista* (1994), and Luis Alberto Romero’s *Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina* (1994). Both studies were from historians who explored the origins and implementation of authoritarian practices in Argentine political culture. Another work that explored the role of civil society was the movie *Un muro de silencio* (1991), directed by Lita Stantic.

247 *Clarín*, 19.03.2001.

248 For a compilation of the most important presentations of the encounter, see: *Puentes* Año 2 nº5, (October 2001).
than being a reaction towards the impossibility of politics. According to Hilb, this kind of violence was profoundly anti-political, because it claimed to replace politics. Hilb argued that contrary to what former militants often stated in their defence, revolutionary violence in Argentina was not reactive but instrumental. This required values that were to a certain extent incompatible with the ideals of social justice that motivated guerrilla action, such as discipline, order, hierarchy, heroism and courage, in their very essence militaristic values. As a consequence, the guerrilla movement was doomed from the start to fall into militarism and authoritarianism (Hilb 2001: 50–61).

Thus there was a whole group of people who participated in the debate on the militant experience of the 1970s, and who were very critical. They disagreed even with the more nuanced attempts to vindicate some aspects of the experience for the present. Among younger generations, there was also irritation about the ways in which former militants tended to idealize their own political experience in counter-position to the more recent political experiences. In her reaction on *Cazadores de Utopías*, Gabriela Cerruti, who was in her thirties when the film came out in 1996, stated that the 1970s were a burden to new generations. Thus she wrote: ‘The glorious seventies are the karma of the subsequent generations. One can not raise a debate without making clear that they were much better than those who would come later’.

Positioning herself clearly in the present she asked, defiantly: ‘Was it worth it? Was it marvellous or unbearable? Or did the valuable barely last two years? How much time are we going to pass yearning for those two years without thinking about the price that had to be paid for those twenty-four months of glory?’ For former militants who vindicated their previous political experience, whether ‘it had been worth it’ was not an issue. What was an issue of debate was what particular aspects had been worth it, and which ones should be discarded.

**The difficult debate on the use of political violence**

The differences between former militants who recovered their previous political experience (or aspects thereof) and outsiders who condemned it, were ideological. They had different ways of looking at democracy, at politics and at social change. The two opposing positions recall those that divided human rights organizations and that have been described in previous chapters. In general, the first group, the former militants, tended to favour socio-economic equality above civil and political liberties, and the collective above the individual. The second group, the critical outsiders, considered that individual civil and political liberties should never be subsumed to collective projects even if these were meant to achieve greater socio-economic equality. They favoured constitutional democracy, even in all its deficiencies, above any other system, and were critical of experiences that pointed to authoritarian political practices. Hilda Sábato, who was a sympathizer of the revolutionary left in the 1970s, referred to her own ideological transformation in the following terms:

I at least did not believe in liberty, I believed in equality and I was ready to exert any type of authoritarianism in order to achieve a more egalitarian society. Today I think, I desire, I fight, so that this society will be based on some principles like pluralism, anti-authoritarianism,
and a democracy in which liberty and equality have equal weight. With all the instability and
contradiction that this might mean.251

They were critical of the authoritarian and anti-institutional character the political
engagements of the 1970s had assumed, and feared a revival of these political practices.

Those former militants who did hold on to their previous political identities recognized
democracy as being preferable to a dictatorship, but were critical of democracy as it was
implemented in Argentina. They considered that democracy could be as coercive and
violent towards its citizens as authoritarian regimes, although the means might differ. Latin
American democracies, and particularly Argentina, could hardly be qualified as such, given
the socio-economic inequalities that characterized them. Thus according to Calveiro (2004:
75), ‘democracies in Latin America today are closer to oligarchies than to democracies’.
Similarly, according to historian Felipe Pigna:

Economic democracy is the only, lets say, real democracy, because it is the one that puts you on an
equal footing. It is impossible to speak of equality when a person works fourteen hours a day, is
illiterate, can not defend himself, does not have a penny, and in front of him there is a lawyer who
has five million dollars and has studied at Harvard; the disparity is huge. So the two persons do
not have the same rights. […] So well, evidently there is no democracy. What one defends is a
legal framework of guarantees, very precarious to tell the truth. (Interview FP 06.06.2003)

They considered that these unequal power relations needed to be levelled, and sought for the
means to do this. In this sense, as in the 1970s, their central preoccupation remained how
to achieve a more equal distribution of resources. The dilemma was, in Pigna’s words: ‘How
do you take away the power from the powerful if not by force? What is the way?’ (Interview
FP 06.06.2003). Looking back on their militant past was also a search for answers to this
question. It was a search for what could be recovered and what should be discarded from that
particular experience.

This vision on democracy, institutions and how to achieve social change also led them
to have a different vision on the issue of political violence. They looked upon guerrilla
violence in different ways, but never condemned it entirely. Those who were most vindictive
of the experience argued that the choice to turn to arms was a logical decision at the time,
justified for being an act of resistance against oppression. Thus in his book No dejes que te la
cuenten, former Montonero Ernesto Jauretche proposed to ‘put on the table the historical
role that Peronism has played in the last fifty years and the legitimacy of the popular use
of political violence’ (Jauretche 1997: 9). Similarly, Maria Fleming, former Montonera and
wife of the number two of the Montoneros Fernando Vaca Narvaja, stated: ‘We carry the
historical responsibility of having been a generation that resisted various dictatorships, let’s
not forget about that’.252 The assassinations of enemies, the so-called ‘acts of popular justice’
were not condemned as such if they were considered to have received sufficient support from
‘the people’. This is well illustrated in the following quote from an interview with former
Montonero Miguel Bonasso in the newspaper La Nación, in which he reflected on the

251 Primeras jornadas de debate interdisciplinario, Organización institucional y contenidos del futuro museo de la
decision of the Montoneros to kill unionist leader José Ignacio Rucci: ‘It was a monstrous crime, especially after having vacillated about an act, which might be considered similar, against the brujo (wizard) José López Rega, after the massacre of Ezeiza. This death at least would have been seen by many people as... Interviewer: Like it was more logical to kill López Rega? Bonasso: Exactly. That is what I mean.’ 253 ‘These militants recognized strategic ‘errors’ of their organization regarding specific armed actions, but did not question the basic assumption that in the particular context of the 1970s armed struggle was justified.

Others were more critical and acknowledged that from the parameters of the present, it was necessary to be more explicative about some of the choices made in the 1970s. Still, however, contrary to outsiders who considered that the choice for armed struggle was inherently authoritarian and therefore problematic, the question for these sectors was not whether armed struggle as such should be condemned. Rather the debate evolved around whether it was justified in the context of the 1970s, and how to evaluate the use that was made of it. In general terms, there was a consensus about two main issues: that a differentiation should be made between ‘popular’ violence, used as a means to resist oppression, and state violence; and that no process of radical social change could be achieved without some form of (popular) violence. Thus Pablo, a former member of the PRT-ERP, stated: ‘I am absolutely convinced that if it is not in a violent way...the social sectors that are excluded from society in another way will not seize power nor achieve important social achievements’ (Interview PL 22.10.2004). Similarly, Pigna considered that, ‘well analysed, well led, with a political meaning, well, it is obvious that historically it is valid, and it was. And there are the world processes: all over the world there were episodes of violence that nowadays are national events’ (Interview FP 06.06.2003). Violence, in an authoritarian context, could give oppressed people a voice. From this perspective, armed actions could accompany processes of social change, for they had the capacity, in the words of Calveiro (2005a: 44) to ‘amplify the political voice’. She mentioned the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Mexico as an example of this added value of the strategic use of political violence: ‘The Mexican indigenous movement, for example, could speak in a “loud voice” after the creation of the EZLN, as an armed movement that had a really singular and carefully thought-out use of violence’.

However, violence as a means to achieve social and political change would only work if armed struggle remained subsumed to politics, if it accompanied the political process. The criticism that was made of the guerrilla experience was directed towards the vanguard approach of the organizations and their increasing militarization, particularly from 1974 onwards. The organizations in Argentina believed that they could lead the revolutionary process, instead of accompanying a process initiated by the people. Whereas in the early years, during the dictatorship of Onganía, there was a certain level of support for the guerrilla movement, their increasing militarization isolated them from their basis and led to a separation of armed struggle from the political process. Thus, it was not the use of political violence in itself that was criticized, but the way it was applied by the guerrilla organizations in Argentina. Illustrative of this conception is the following quote of Eduardo Anguita, one of the authors of La Voluntad and former member of the PRT-ERP:

E: Concerning the matter of violence in the seventies, I have a position of absolute ambiguity because on the one hand I know that the processes of revolutionary transformation necessarily

253 La Nación, 23.03.1997.
demand the valiant decision of persons. I don't know if I was sufficiently valiant or not, but I did what I believed I had to do and...globally, I do not regret this. But on the other hand, the use of violence in the absence of good political leadership leads to militarism and this sickens any process of revolutionary transformation, and in our case militarism caught us from the beginning.

It is not that it caught us many years later, it caught us right from the beginning.

S: You are talking about the ERP?
E: Yes, the ERP, Montoneros, all the Argentine guerrilla groups. We were born addicted to militarism and this has profoundly marked us, because when they defeated us by force of arms, it was clear that we did not have the capacity to appreciate all the rest of the joint knowledge that we had, so what we had in common remained...remained left aside... (Interview EA5 28.12.2004)

The extent to which political violence remained an explosive matter became clear in the polemic that arose after an intellectual from Córdoba, Oscar Del Barco, sent a letter to the magazine La Intemperie, in which he condemned any form of political violence. In his letter, he reacted to an interview published in an earlier issue of the same magazine, in which a former member of the guerrilla organization Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo (EGP) recalled the assassination of two members of the group by the leadership. This episode shocked Del Barco and motivated him to write a letter that condemned the use of violence as a means to achieve social change. In his letter, he stated, indignantly: 'There is no “ideal” that justifies the death of a man, be it of General Aramburu254, of a militant or of a policeman. The founding principle of the entire community is you shall not murder'. He compared the two icons of the Latin American guerrilla, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, with Stalin, Lenin, Trotsky and Mao and called them 'serial assassins'.255 His letter generated a bitter polemic in La Intemperie and in Lucha Armada. Reactions aimed at demonstrating the simplicity of Del Barco’s reasoning for not taking into account that fact that values and founding principles did not exist outside their historical context. Del Barco was accused of being ‘fundamentalist’, ‘mystical’, or ‘hysterical’.256 Reflecting on these reactions, philosopher Héctor Schmucler wrote: ‘Is it so difficult to understand that condemning assassinations because no human being should believe itself to have the right to deny someone else their life, does not mean accepting the ideas of the other and giving in to the struggle to establish different conditions of existence?’257 Although much of the polemic arose as a result of the terms Del Barco had chosen to condemn political violence, the reactions also showed how difficult it still was to discuss the issue in militant circles.

254 General Aramburu was a victim of the Montoneros in May 1970 and it was with his kidnapping and subsequent assassination that the organization presented itself to society. Aramburu was targeted for his responsibility in the military coup that overthrew Perón in 1955, the simultaneous bombings of the Plaza de Mayo, the crushing down of a Peronist rebellion in 1956, and the disappearance of Eva Perón’s body. Many Peronists saw his death as a justified act of popular justice but other sectors saw it as an expression of the ever increasing levels of violence in the country (Robben 2005: 107-8).

255 ‘Carta de Oscar del Barco’, La Intemperie nº17 (Córdoba: December 2004).


What to recover for the present?
Besides their different understanding of political violence and social change, former militants and critical outsiders also differed in their approach to the past. Whereas former militants revised their past with the purpose of extracting political lessons for the present, outsiders considered that historical truth was key and therefore a more distant and investigative approach was necessary. Their motivations for exploring the past were thus intrinsically different. The contrast becomes most visible when looking at the contributions of Pilar Calveiro, who addresses similar questions as critical outsiders like Sarlo, Vezzetti or Altamirano. Calveiro, like Sarlo, pleaded for a re-examination of the past that would not avoid the most difficult aspects of the militant experience. Like Vezzetti and Altamirano, she was interested in analysing the role and responsibility of the guerrilla in the process that led to the military dictatorship. However, whereas these intellectuals saw the past as an object of study that required a certain distance, she pleaded for revisiting the militant experience from a political perspective, analysing what it could mean in the search for an alternative for social change (Calveiro 2004: 77). She recognized the subjective character of this approach, but consciously chose it. Making explicit her intention to intervene on the present, she introduced her own work on the militant experience of the 1970s as an ‘exercise of memory’, rather than a ‘history of the problem’ (Calveiro 2005b: 32). Contrary to history, memory, as Calveiro understood it, started out from the lived experience, and particularly from marks left by lived experiences on the social body. It was an instrument for transmitting these experiences to others, and could establish links – Calveiro speaks of ‘building bridges’ – between ‘the needs of the present, the experience of the past, and the need to open up an always different future’ (Calveiro 2004: 72). Establishing bridges between the past, the present and the future would permit identifying the similarities and the differences between the experience of the 1970s and the present. This in its turn would make it understandable from the parameters of the present, and make it possible to recover particular aspects of the experience.

Although she formulated her proposal in terms of questions to address when revisiting the past, Calveiro did have a concrete vision of what should be recovered from the militancy of the 1970s. Concretely, she aimed at recovering a particular understanding of politics that had been central in the 1970s, and which she defined as: ‘A politics in the strong and resistant meaning of the term, as a challenge to inventing a common world’ (Calveiro 2005b: 36). She contrasted this with the way politics was understood in the present. ‘Nowadays it is as though practising politics would have become acting according to a pre-established and poor script, and representing persons preconceived by the media, washed-up, sad beings instead of real actors, capable of creating, inventing and taking risks – recognizing that these have always been scant’ (Calveiro 2005b: 36). According to her, from the military dictatorship onwards, there had been a ‘loss of politics’:

I believe that there is a loss of participation in what we call politics. The whole privatizing tendency tends to think of politics as an area of experts from which the rest can dispense with. The idea is promoted that politics is a specialized place, taken care of by those who have a technical capacity to take complex decisions, and what the rest of us would do is to go to the urns and vote, for one or for another, depending on the face that appeals most to us of those who appeared on television. Here there is a loss of politics, understood in terms of power relations that involve –
and are the duty of – the collective, and on which public projects and policies depend. (Calveiro 2004: 75)

This vision was broadly shared among former militants. It was argued that the 1970s had been a period in which a particular conception of the political had predominated, that sharply contrasted with political practices in the present. Thus, according to former militants, in the 1970s a conception of politics in which the common good stood above individual needs had been generalized among the militants engaged in revolutionary organizations. This was often referred to as ética militante (militant ethics). It was this ética militante together with the will to engage in a cause for social justice that was to be recovered for the present. When reflecting upon what she valued from her past militancy, Mónica, former member of the Juventud Guevarista (JG)\(^\text{258}\), stated:

> What I basically value is my ideology, my ethics, my inclination towards solidarity and caring, that remain intact, and that can be with a plaster, with a bandage, half amputated, but... [...] everything that I did I would do again, because it arose from the best intentions, and with the purpose of creating a more dignified and more egalitarian society... (Interview MP 18.10.2003)

This engagement was contrasted with the present, in which these values were absent, political participation was on the decrease and politics was associated with personal gain and corruption. Thus, Marisa, a former member of the JUP, stated:

> ...I believe that all the values that were proclaimed in the seventies are worthy of being transported throughout the years and to be brought back. Especially because now there are no values, this is real and concrete. Not only in politics are we...there is a degradation that I directly can not...I try to stay away from party politics and the rest, because I think it is very shocking. (Interview MS2 19.10.2004)

The lack of political participation and of a more ethical political practice, were seen as direct consequences of the military dictatorship. The high levels of repression had cut short political organization, and had destroyed the social ties that were necessary to foment collective organization. Fear of repression had led to individualism and a retraction from the public sphere. Furthermore, a whole generation of politically engaged citizens had disappeared, and this necessarily had consequences for the present. Jorge, former militant and member of the AEDD, formulated this as follows:

> We in the Association, we often say that the victims of state terrorism were not the 30,000 disappeared, but the entire society. And when we look at different things we realize that there is a strong influence, if you see what the unions are, the associations of employees, the student centres, the neighbourhood organizations, there are still aspects of fear, of non-commitment, of the idea that others will solve the things. (Interview JW 29.11.2004)

\(^{258}\) The Juventud Guevarista (JG) was the Marxist counterpart of the Peronist Unión de Estudiantes Secundarios (UES). Like the UES for the Montoneros, the JG was the grassroots organization of secondary school students that carried out political activities for the PRT-ERP.
Jorge contrasted this lack of engagement with the attitude of the generation of the 1970s: ‘If someone asks me what the generation of the seventies was, I say that we wanted to be actors, not spectators. And because of that we made many mistakes, but we did things. Today it seems like the students, the leaders of the different unions, say, “well, we are going to see what happens”, and nobody does anything’ (Interview JW 29.11.2004).

Through revalorizing the ethics, solidarity and commitment that had characterized the militant experience of the 1970s, former militants hoped to reverse these effects and create an awareness that collective organization could lead to social change. Therefore, they actively pleaded for a memory of the past in which there would be room for the political dimensions of the experience. They were often critical of the more individual and private ways of remembering the disappeared that had predominated among human rights organizations and relatives. They considered it one more expression of the de-politicization of an experience that had been eminently political. Not only for political reasons, but also out of respect for whom the disappeared had been, a memory of the past should recapture the political meaning of the experience and try to re-elaborate it for the needs of the present. For Graciela Daleo, former Montonera and member of the AEDD, this search for public recognition of the militant experience of the 1970s was not an ‘anachronistic search or insisting on a fixation on nostalgia. It is about reconstructing our identity as a people. Going back to thinking about making the revolution. Which is not a moment in life, but life lived in a revolutionary way’ (Daleo 1998: 241).

Not all militants pleaded for a revalorization of the concept of revolution. Lila, a former Montonera, stated that she now principally aimed at ‘the transformation of society in a place where solidarity is valued a little bit more…at this stage we do not aspire to that of before, which was to change it entirely’ (Interview LP 27.09.2004). In general, rather than pleading for radical social change, former militants had a more selective approach to their militant past. Certain values and the ideals of social change were valorized while other aspects were discarded. This is why many identified with Kirchner’s vindication of the past, which they considered an important step forward in this re-politicization of the memories of the past. They valorized it for permitting to reinstall those particular aspects of the militant experience that were relevant for the present as well. These were, according to former militant and intellectual Casullo, ‘the search of a social good, fraternity with the other, a national idea’.259 Kirchner focussed on the militant experience of the early years before it fell into militarism and adopted messianic proportions. Thus according to Casullo: ‘…Kirchner speaks of other types of the seventies, the seventies of life, of politics, of intentions of change, of ethics and morals’.260 Principally, what was to be recovered was a certain notion of resistance and of agency, the belief that through collective organization one could contribute to social and political change.

New issues for the historical debate on the 1970s

One of the consequences of the debate that took root from the mid-1990s has been that relatives of the disappeared, human rights organizations and other groups struggling for truth, justice and memory have increasingly recognized the political identity of the majority of the disappeared publicly. Although, for many relatives, participation in armed struggle remains

259 Página/12, 01.02.2004.
260 Página/12, 01.02.2004.
a difficult subject, few would now still deny the political participation of their disappeared relatives. Among human rights organizations, some, like H.I.J.O.S., Familiares, or the Liga vindicate the political struggles of the disappeared for the present, whereas others, like CELS, Abuelas or the APDH are more cautious. But all recognize the fact that most of the disappeared were political militants, often members of a guerrilla organization. In the media, the militant experience of the 1970s is openly discussed and even politicians, including the President, have vindicated their previous participation in a revolutionary organization. Thus, although among broad sectors of society there is still indifference or even rejection of the revolutionary experience, a public space has emerged in recent years to acknowledge, discuss and even vindicate a more politicized memory of the 1970s.

However, in the attempts to re-politicize the memories of the past, most attention has gone to the experience of the revolutionary organizations of the 1970s, and especially the Montoneros. Far less attention has been paid to other experiences of social protest that emerged and developed in the 1970s, and that constituted a broad movement of political and cultural contention. Among them were the combative labour unions that emerged in the numerous factories in the surroundings of the cities of Buenos Aires, Rosario and Córdoba. These unions were able to move from very practical demands to a complete redefinition of the question of private property. Their activities also had a strong confrontational character. They included the occupation of plants and the taking of hostages. They often had a great capacity to mobilize other sectors of society as well, especially in the cities, where the factories were visible to the citizens and where the workers took to the streets to ask for the support and solidarity of the people (Romero 1994: 241-2). In the public health sector, the education system, the cultural or even the financial sector, initiatives developed that aimed at more profound social and political transformations, which would start on the workfloor but would irradiate to other sectors of civil society. An example of such an experience was the Proyecto de Hospital Nuevo that was implemented in 1973 in the Hospital Nacional Alejandro Posadas in the province of Buenos Aires. The project aimed at breaking with established ranks and hierarchies between medical and non-medical employees, implementing a more participative decision-making process concerning the policies of the hospital. Furthermore, it considered that access to health was a right that should be guaranteed through a public and free health service that would also actively involve the community in the prevention and promotion of health. The project was implemented after a period of intense mobilizations of employees of the hospital, which led to the removal of the conservative management team of the hospital and their replacement by the candidates proposed by the employees (Alvarez 2003: 19-25).

Guerrilla organizations often supported these initiatives, and in several cases militants of the revolutionary organizations were among the group of initiators. In the case of Hospital Posadas, several of the employees who played an active role in the reform of the hospital were members of the Peronist grassroots organizations depending on Montoneros, and the organization actively participated in the taking of the hospital (Interview CP 16.12.2004). Similarly, the guerrillas actively supported the demands of workers and contributed to the most radical actions, particularly the taking of hostages (Interview SB 05.10.2004). However, these collective initiatives were still independent of the guerrillas. Furthermore, in contrast to the guerrillas that were organized according to vertical and hierarchic structures, they aimed at implementing radical forms of democratic participation on the workfloor or within the unions. Finally, although many of their actions were anti-institutional, they did not rely on armed struggle to achieve their political demands. This is why, according to Oberti
and Pittaluga (2006: 134), this contentious movement ‘...did not remain trapped in the authoritarian and exclusionary political practices that were characteristic for the political field of Argentina’. These initiatives particularly prospered between 1969 and 1974, after which they became badly hit by the repression of the Triple A and saw their space diminished as armed struggle increasingly occupied the centre of the stage. In this sense, Oberti and Pittaluga (2006: 134) state that these practices were:

Doubly defeated: defeated by the state repression of the democratic period of 1973-1976 (by the Triple A, but also by the new penal code and the law on Professional Associations) and the state repression between 1976 and 1983; and defeated within the same field of the new left, in which they lost the struggle to constitute a hegemonic and autonomous expression of the mass movements.

Historians and others who have participated in the debate on the past have increasingly pointed to the absence of these experiences in the discussion of the antecedents of the dictatorship. Particularly striking has been the lack of attention for the experience of the combative unions. Reflecting on this situation, historian Federico Lorenz states: ‘A big absentee in this discussion is the workers movement. For me this is a concern. The public image of the workers movement is that they are corrupt, traitors, I say, there were plenty of people who did not have anything to do with that’ (Interview FL 05.12.2006). This absence is also expressed in the fact that, although according to the numbers of the CONADEP at least thirty percent of the disappeared were workers, the figure of the disappeared worker has received far less attention in public commemorations than that of the disappeared intellectual or student. According to Da Silva Catela (2001: 175-6) this absence is due to the fact that those who could have vindicated these figures, the unions, have shown little interest in doing so. Those unions who have organized commemorative activities generally represent the middle classes, particularly the educative unions like ATE or SUTEBA, the unions of state employees, or the relatively new Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA). Lorenz explains the absence of the image of the disappeared worker in dominant memory by the fact that, contrary to the middle classes, this sector lacks the relations and what he calls the ‘cultural tools’ that are necessary to impel their demands (Interview FL 05.12.2006).

Historians like Lorenz or Oberti and Pittaluga, as well as some of the protagonists of these other collective experiences, have pointed out the need to go beyond the focus on the politico-military organizations. Reflecting on the current knowledge of the 1970s, Lorenz states that there is too much information on some aspects and too little on others. Thus he explains: ‘We are still in the situation of telling. That is why I was telling you that the thing with the testimony is a cheat, it is not that there are plenty of testimonies, there are plenty of testimonies about some things, but many are lacking on other things’ (Interview FL 05.12.2006). Illustrating his statement, Lorenz mentions his experience as a historian recollecting testimonies for the oral archive of Memoria Abierta. In this archive, eighty percent of the testimonies are from members of the middle classes and more specifically from militants of the armed organizations. Of these eighty percent, seventy percent are from former Montoneros. One attempt to redress this situation has been the inclusion of a
collection on the workers of the Astilleros Astarza. It was when Lorenz started interviewing these workers that he realized what their absence meant for the historical understanding of the 1970s. He realized that this huge group of militants had not been able to go into hiding and even less into exile, thus going through an entirely different experience. It also confronted him with the fact that many of the elements that had acquired great centrality in public memory, such as for example the anniversary of the military coup, did not have the same relevance for them because they had been persecuted since 1973 (Interview FL 05.12.2006). The inclusion of these other stories has only recently started.

Conclusion

In the 1980s, several elements contributed to construct a silence on the political identity of the disappeared and the period of political confrontation between different societal projects that preceded the military dictatorship. Several factors, which reinforced each other, contributed to this situation: the general rejection of political violence; an official policy which aimed at closing the subject; the difficulties of the survivors of the repression to deal with their own experiences both of repression and of participation in a political project that had been destroyed together with the dictatorship; the necessity to condemn the crimes committed by the military dictatorship; all these elements contributed to constructing a narrative of the past that ignored the political causes of the repression. Studies produced on the subject in the 1980s were condemnatory of the experience, and the imagery of the guerrilla movement was that of a handful of militaristic combatants who had been relatively isolated from the population. There was little space to present a more nuanced account of the experience. The lack of critical self-reflection of some of the surviving leaders of these organizations, particularly of the Montoneros, about the way they conducted their political struggle did not help to get a clearer picture of those years. The resurgence of guerrilla violence and of military repression in 1989 reinstated the fear of political violence and contributed to the difficulty of speaking in a different way about the revolutionary protests of the 1970s.

With the twentieth anniversary of the military coup, which also marked the emergence of a new generation that had not been a protagonist of the 1970s, the need to construct a different narrative of these years became stronger. New generations started questioning their elders about their activities in the 1970s; a context that was less euphoric about democracy and where both explanations and alternatives for the present context of socio-economic inequalities was sought; children of the disappeared who wanted to know more about their parents; all these elements confronted former militants with their own silences and triggered them to intervene more actively in the construction of an alternative narrative of the militant experience of the 1970s. Former militants started to tell their stories, attempting to break with the negative image of the guerrilla experience constructed in the 1980s, as well as with the de-politicized image of the disappeared that had been fomented by relatives and human rights organizations. These interventions also showed important differences between how leaders and combatants remembered the militancy of the 1970s, and grassroots militants who

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261 The case of Astilleros Astarza is illustrative of the repression that hit the working class. It refers to the arrest, on the morning of 24 March 1976, of sixty dockworkers of the Astarza shipyard in San Fernando (province of Buenos Aires). They were taken to the nearby Tigre police station. Some of them were later released, but a large group of them remains disappeared (CONADEP 2003: 376; Robben 2005: 198).
had been mainly dedicated to political tasks. Grassroots militants were often not only writing against the ‘demonization’ of the guerrilla movement, but also against their former leadership, whom they held responsible for taking ruthless decisions.

In their attempts to distance themselves from their leaders, however, these interventions often tended not only to present an idealized version of the grassroots militants but also to reproduce the logic of moral condemnation that was constitutive of the theory of the two devils. This perspective was being increasingly criticized. Former militants who valorized their previous political identities but were critical of the idealization in much of the testimonial literature wanted to go beyond the moralistic approach. They proposed approaching the subject from a political perspective, thinking of the past in terms of a political experience. They proposed making a political balance of what had worked and what had not, searching for a political explanation for the defeat of their organizations. The testimonial literature was also strongly criticized by outsiders who considered that the versions presented were mystifications. They were critical of what they considered a political use of the past and believed that an evaluation of the militant experience of the 1970s would benefit from a more distant approach. Although these two groups urged for a more critical approach to the past, fundamental ideological differences ran like a dividing line between them. Those who pleaded for a more detached approach to the past considered that there was nothing to be recovered from the militant experience of the 1970s in terms of political practices and values for the present. But this was different for former militants who vindicated their previous political identities. To them, the question was not whether the experience had been worth it, but rather, what aspects could help in the formulation of an alternative for the present.

Although in many forums the general prejudices against the revolutionary experience continue to predominate, the militant experience of the 1970s has definitely acquired greater centrality in public memory. Not only has the political identity of the disappeared been acknowledged among groups struggling for truth, justice and memory, but the revolutionary organizations of the 1970s have also become a central issue of discussion in the media, as well as in different cultural and political fields. The experience of revolutionary Peronism has received particular attention, among others because former President Kirchner and numerous of his close collaborators were part of this experience and publicly vindicated their previous political identities. In this sense, the attempts of former militants to re-politicize the memories of the recent past have been highly successful and the revolutionary experience of the 1970s has now become an integral part of the public memory of those years. At the same time, historians have increasingly stressed the fact that whereas there is now a lot of information available on the politico-military organizations of the 1970s, there is still little information on other aspects of this highly contentious period.

The absence of the workers movement in the discussions on the politicized 1970s is striking in this context, and is increasingly mentioned by historians as a gap in both the knowledge and the memories of the past. To a large extent, the lack of testimonies on the workers experience can be attributed to the fact that workers and their relatives have been less active in making public claims for their disappeared. Demands in this context have been mainly impelled by the sectors of the (urban) middle classes, represented in the human rights organizations, the cultural sector and the political sector. This reveals the extent to which public memories are determined by the capacity of groups and individuals to install their version of the past in public space. The recent questioning of the strong focus on the revolutionary organizations in public memory also reveals that counter-narratives can, over
time, become ‘dominant’ narratives that become, in their turn, challenged again by other counter-narratives. The Kirchner administration played an important role in institutionalizing a certain interpretation of the revolutionary experience – and of the military dictatorship in general. In the following chapter we will take a more in-depth look at this role, and analyse some of its side effects for the struggle for truth, justice and memory.