Struggling with the past: the human rights movement and the politics of memory in post-dictatorship Argentina (1983-2006)
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8. Concluding reflections on the struggles over the past in Argentina

The human rights movement that emerged in opposition to the military dictatorship in Argentina and later expanded in the post-dictatorship context has played a crucial role in shaping both the contents of public memory and the ways in which the past was dealt with at the institutional and political levels. The movement has been successful in both seizing and creating political opportunities. This success culminated in the institutionalization of demands, the reopening of trials, and the emergence of new actors that adopted the ideals of the movement and supported its claims. But the movement also transformed significantly over time, growing from a relatively small number of organizations to a great variety of groups and initiatives which identified with its demands for truth and justice and memory. These new actors introduced new expressions of collective memory and new visions of the past, increasing the already significant heterogeneity of the movement. Internal relations became more problematic when political opportunities emerged due to changes in official policies. Different 'political projects' were pursued in the name of truth, justice and memory, leading to internal conflicts over the direction of the struggle, the relation to the state and to society, and the relation between the crimes committed in the past and in the present.

The changing political, social and economic context clearly influenced the contents and forms of the struggle. In the 1980s, the threat of military upheaval strongly constrained the possibilities of the human rights movement from achieving full legal accountability. Furthermore, the generalized fear of a resurgence of political violence and chaos influenced the ways in which the human rights movement framed its demands and limited the extent to which it was able to be open about the political identity and projects of many of the disappeared. In the 1990s, neoliberalism, new human rights violations, and state policies of impunity and silence unexpectedly aroused the resistance and creativity of the human rights movement. From 2003 onwards, the new political context under Kirchner created important opportunities, but also led to internal fragmentation. Finally, the parallel re-emergence of conservative voices vindicating state terrorism and reviving the theory of the two devils conditioned the extent to which the human rights movement was able to accept different interpretations of the recent past.

In this conclusion, I return to the main question posed at the beginning of this study: how has the struggle for truth, justice and memory of the Argentine human rights movement evolved over time in a dynamic interaction with its social and political environment? I first discuss the findings of the period of the democratic transition and its aftermath, moving from a strong state involvement in matters of the past to its progressive retraction and the consolidation of impunity and silence. I then discuss the emergence of new actors in the struggle for truth, justice and memory from the twentieth anniversary of the military coup onwards, assessing what this has meant for the struggles over the past. Finally, I turn to the period of the Kirchner administration, and the subsequent institutionalization of truth, justice and memory, assessing its consequences for the struggles over the past, and more specifically for the human rights movement. I conclude with an overview of the main lessons that can be drawn from this study.
The democratic transition and its aftermath: the politics of human rights

The period of the democratic transition, from 1983 to 1985, was characterized by a strong presence of the human rights movement that emerged in response to the gross violations committed under the military regime. The movement, composed mostly of relatives of the disappeared, significantly influenced the character of the democratic transition. It successfully managed to reframe the crimes committed by the military regime as human rights violations, as well as to impose human rights as the foundation of public life in the new democratic order. Human rights became one of the 'sacred elements of the transition' (Lorenz 2006: 211). The movement also managed to transform the initial design of the accountability process, which was mainly oriented towards limiting the trials and avoiding the condemnation of the armed forces as an institution. The contribution of the movement to the investigation of the truth commission and to the trial of the juntas enabled the quality of the accountability process to be significantly enhanced. The report of the truth commission convincingly demonstrated that the human rights violations committed under the military regime had been systematically planned within the highest ranks of the armed forces. The trial of the juntas confirmed the interpretation of the commission and de-legitimized the voices of the military in favour of those of the victims.

The truth commission in 1984 and the trial of the juntas in 1985 are generally considered foundational events for the new Argentine democracy. They provided proof of the violations committed, deconstructed the military’s discourse in attempting to justify the disappearances, and confronted society with its own denial. However, they were also foundational in another sense: they were both guided by, and contributed to, installing a narrative of the past that suited the needs of Argentine society in that particular period, and that came to be known as the ‘theory of the two devils’. In this narrative, the military dictatorship was the result of a confrontation between the guerrilla organizations and the armed forces, each bearing equal responsibility for the violence that characterized the period. Society was caught in the middle, victim of the violence unleashed by both ‘demons’. In this interpretation, both the military and the guerrilla movement had contributed to a context of political chaos and violence, from which the new democratic government wanted to break away.

The theory of the two devils, which found expression through various stages of the accountability process – in the prologue of the report of the truth commission, in the decision to bring the leaders of the guerrilla to trial etc. – was not an invention of President Alfonsín. Rather, it drew upon existing sentiments and interpretations already circulating within society. However, its adoption and implementation by the state transformed it into the dominant interpretation of the events that had led to the military dictatorship. As such, it shaped the contours of public memory in the period of the democratic transition. In the first place, it contributed to a lack of debate on the political causes of the repression and, especially, on the responsibility of civil actors in the events leading to the military dictatorship. On the side of the victims, it contributed to silencing the political identity of the disappeared, in an attempt to enhance their ‘innocence’: in the narrative that predominated at the time, if they had been members of the guerrilla organizations they would have been ‘lesser victims’.

This silence and the demonization of the victims who had been politically active resulted in a necessary debate on the revolutionary projects of the 1970s being postponed. Rather unexpectedly, the reframing of the past events in terms of human rights violations, victims and perpetrators institutionalized through the truth commission and the trial of the juntas
reinforced these effects. While crucial for the deconstruction of the military argument that they had fought a ‘just war against subversion’, the juridical language also made agency and political identities of the victims irrelevant, reinforcing the silence on these issues. This was enhanced by the fact that the focus of attention lay on the violations committed, rather than on their political causes. As a result, the public memory that came to predominate in the 1980s was one that closed the debate on the past rather than creating room for a deeper reflection on its meaning and consequences.

Alfonsín’s purpose was to limit the accountability process in time, especially the juridical prosecutions of military and police officers. But the human rights organizations and victims were not prepared to let their case rest, and they flooded the courts with claims, both before and after the trial of the juntas. The possibility of juridical prosecution caused huge unrest within the armed forces, and led to two upheavals which brought back memories of the military coup. Alfonsín reacted by cutting short the process of legal prosecution through two laws, the Full Stop law and the Due Obedience law, causing great disillusionment within the human rights movement. His successor Menem seemingly cut off the road to justice by granting two presidential pardons, for the officers that were awaiting trial and for the generals condemned at the historical trial of the juntas in 1985. He justified his measures with the argument that reconciliation was the path to choose, thus equating impunity with reconciliation. The pardons were also part of a broader programme to reorganize the country according to the dogmas of neoliberalism, combined with a tendency to rule by decree and to subsume democratic institutions such as the judiciary to the power of the executive. Menem’s two presidencies were characterized by a shrinking state, privatization of public services, a deepening of socio-economic inequalities, widespread corruption, and police violence.

The impunity laws and the pardons marked the retraction of the state from the matters of the past, leaving it exclusively to the societal arena and, even more specifically, to the human rights organizations. Truth and justice became associated with sectarian demands of the victims, instead of being part of a democratic process of restoring the rule of law and securing human rights. The human rights organizations suffered from the isolation and the feelings of disillusionment as a consequence of the backlash in the search for justice. New cases of power abuse within the police came to light, pushing the demands for truth and justice to the background. Indeed, much of the literature on the human rights movement of that period stated that the movement had become socially and politically isolated and plagued by internal differences.

However, a number of developments, which were also partly the consequence of the persistent activity of human rights organizations, conflated to enable the human rights movement to make an important comeback. The public confessions of Navy Captain Adolfo Scilingo shocked public opinion, and put the past back onto the public agenda. His confessions unleashed a dozen of other confessions, as well as a (more or less far-reaching) recognition of responsibilities of the three forces in the crimes committed under the military dictatorship. They also led to a debate on the complicity of the Catholic Church hierarchy in the repression. Furthermore, the confessions took place at a particular moment in time, close to the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary. The anniversary had a strong symbolic appeal, not least because it marked the first public appearance of a younger generation of victims of the dictatorship, the children of the disappeared and other victims of the dictatorship, now organized in the organization H.I.J.O.S.
Rejuvenated by this participation of a new generation, the human rights movement managed to successfully grasp the opportunities that the societal context offered. In the first place, it was able to reformulate its demands according to the new circumstances. The concept of impunity was coined as a means to connect the lack of solution for the crimes of the dictatorship, and the problems that derived from incomplete democracy in general. In this ‘master frame’ (Benford and Snow 1992) the new human rights violations and the deepening of socio-economic inequalities were a direct consequence of impunity towards the crimes of the past. Secondly, they were successful in adapting their strategies to the new context of institutionalized impunity. They combined a legal and institutional strategy with non-institutional strategies. Using legal mechanisms, they secured a number of rights such as the right to truth, or the right to economic reparations, that obliged the state to assume its responsibility for the crimes committed under the military regime. They also searched for loopholes in the impunity laws so as to make prosecution possible. An example of this was the prosecution of Videla and Massera for baby theft in 1996. Finally, sensing the growing sensibility of civil society to the subject, the human rights movement sought to influence public opinion, creating awareness among ordinary citizens and trying to gain their solidarity. This was a strategy applied by H.I.J.O.S. with their escraches, and by Abuelas in their search for children – now turned into adolescents – kidnapped during the dictatorship.

It was in this period of institutionalized impunity and generational change that memory also emerged forcefully as one of the goals of the human rights movement, alongside the demands for ‘truth’ and ‘justice’ that were most central during the 1980s. It principally emerged as a mandate against oblivion, in what Stern (2004: xxvi) has called the ‘dichotomy of memory against forgetting’. The impunity laws enhanced the fear among relatives of the victims that their loved ones would be forgotten, and that the historical interpretation of the military would prevail again. They thought that, ultimately, this could lead to history repeating itself. Memory therefore emerged as a powerful counterforce against both denial and impunity, becoming an extension of the struggle for truth and justice. It was intended to prevent repetition, in what Jelin and Kaufman (2000: 93) have called the ‘cultural imperative’ of ‘Remember! So as no to repeat (Recordar para no repetir)’. Memory was to assure the Nunca más coined by the truth commission and used as a statement by Public Prosecutor Strassera in the trial of the juntas.

In this interpretation, memory had a clear function with respect to the future: it was to prevent repetition and secure a different future. At the same time, it was in the act of defining what this future should be, what kind of social change one had in mind and, by extension, what elements of the past should then be transmitted and how, that the strongest differences emerged between human rights organizations. It was here that ideological differences between institutional organizations and more radical organizations became most visible, causing division on the grounds of both the content of memory and the ways of remembering. These differences would play a key role in the various initiatives for memory that arose from the mid-1990s onwards.

**Twenty years after the coup: ‘new’ actors, ‘new’ issues of debate**

From the second half of the 1990s, an increasing societal interest in the recent past came into being. The influence of the human rights movement could be seen in the support it gained
for its demands for truth, justice and memory, particularly among the more progressive sectors of the urban middle classes, reflecting its capacity to reach out to other sectors of civil society. A whole range of new actors, both victims and non-victims, became involved in the struggle for truth, justice and memory. Their participation led to new expressions of memory, as well as to new debates on the recent past and on how to remember it. They challenged the official version of the past and introduced a more political understanding of the recent past than had been promoted by the human rights movement until then. Many of these new expressions of memory and debates were strongly influenced by the institutional, political and economic crisis that started in December 2001 and continued in 2002, showing how the present constantly influenced the process of memory in Argentina.

Two important phenomena were a direct consequence of the emergence of new actors. The first was the ‘decentralization’ of memory initiatives to the neighbourhoods and the establishment of physical and geographical markers of memory, which conflated with the parallel phenomenon of recovery of former secret detention centres. This process was mostly initiated by politically aware neighbours, companions of the disappeared, or survivors and relatives of the disappeared who had not previously been active in the struggle for truth, justice and memory. The second phenomenon which occurred simultaneously was the ‘re-politicization’ of the analysis of the military dictatorship, moving beyond the theory of the two devils. The political causes of the repression and, more specifically, the political identity and projects of the disappeared, became central issues of debate from the second half of the 1990s onwards. This phenomenon was to a large extent promoted by former militants who had survived the repression.

Three developments contributed to the decentralization of memory. Firstly, individuals and groups – mostly former companions of the disappeared – increasingly felt the necessity to commemorate their loved ones in the settings in which they had known them. In the wake of the twentieth anniversary, commissions were created at universities, schools and on the workplace to commemorate the disappeared of these places. These commemorations were often concluded by establishing memory markers, such as plaques, trees or murals. The neighbourhood commissions that emerged halfway through the 1990s were one more expression of this development, generally created with the intention to commemorate the disappeared of a given neighbourhood. Secondly, the second half of the 1990s was characterized by the decentralization of activities within the broader field of social protest. Social and political groups increasingly chose to develop small-scale territorialized initiatives oriented towards creating social and political awareness within civil society, rather than to focus on the centres of power. This phenomenon was to reach a climax in the context of the political and institutional crisis of December 2001, when popular assemblies that questioned institutional politics and sought democratic alternatives flourished throughout Buenos Aires. Finally, there was a growth of initiatives to recover places that had been used as secret detention centres during the dictatorship so as to convert them into sites of memory.

All these developments converged in the case of the Floresta neighbourhood, where a number of neighbourhood initiatives arose to recover the former secret detention centre El Olimpo (chapter four). The case shows how the growing diversity of both state and societal actors reflected a broader appropriation of the demands for truth, justice and memory, but also enhanced the potential for conflict over how and what to remember. Local initiatives to recover El Olimpo were initially oriented towards removing the Federal Police that occupied the terrain. However, political orientations varied, and a dispute arose concerning the best
proposal for the place. One group had an institutional approach, searching for involvement of state actors, whereas another group, that emerged in the wake of the crisis of 2001, was strongly against state involvement. An entirely new dynamics arose when their demands for removal of the police were met by the state under Kirchner’s presidency, and the place was assigned to become a memory site. In this context, the range of actors involved in the initiative widened, with historical human rights organizations and survivors of the secret detention centre and state representatives becoming more actively involved. As visions about how to give meaning to the place diverged, new disputes arose as to who had the ‘political power and moral right’ (Deacon 1998: 170) to decide what to do about the place. Other cases of recovery of former secret detention centres showed that these disputes were not exclusive to the El Olimpo case.

In many of these local initiatives, survivors played an important role. These survivors were generally also former militants, active in one of the many revolutionary organizations that had emerged in the 1970s. Their contributions to the debates that arose in the context of these memory projects were often oriented towards restoring the political ideals and projects of the disappeared. This was part of a broader development that had started halfway through the 1990s, in which former militants increasingly contributed to the debates on the recent past through cultural products – books, documentaries, etc., on their political experience in the 1970s (chapter five). This ‘public reappearance’ of former militants and of the memories of their political experiences in the 1970s occurred after many years of silence. Contributing to this silence were the personal traumas of former militants, as well as the generalized condemnation of the revolutionary experience of the 1970s that predominated in the 1980s and which made it difficult to be open about one’s own participation in this project. The emergence of a new generation questioning their elders about their roles and responsibilities, and the passing of time, stimulated former militants to reflect publicly upon their previous political experiences. Also contributing to the creation of a renewed interest in these political projects was the need to rethink political alternatives in a context of widespread corruption, impunity and growing socio-economic inequalities. The revolutionary experience of the 1970s had precisely tried to formulate an alternative and to radically transform the system and existing power relations, and now both militants and new generations were looking back at what this experience had entailed and why it had been silenced.

The first attempts by former militants to rework the experience of the 1970s were to a great extent constructed in opposition to the so-called ‘theory of the two devils’. They aimed at showing that, far from being ‘devils’, the former militants had been common youngsters with ideals of social justice. Many of these works were published by grassroots militants, who set themselves the double task of breaking with both the negative image that the guerrilla experience had acquired, and with the de-politicized image of the victims. However, in constructing their stories in opposition to the dominant narrative, they were also conditioned by it. They tended to idealize the grassroots militants and to attribute a major responsibility to the leadership, thus reproducing the logic of moral condemnation that was a constitutive part of the theory of the two devils. Furthermore, in their fear of playing the cards of the theory of the two devils, they steered clear of the more delicate issues that had contributed to the negative image of the experiences, such as the use of political violence. In an attempt to offer a way out, some more analytical contributions attempted to approach the subject not from a moral perspective, i.e. in terms of good or bad, but from a political perspective,
analysing the experience in political terms. This was an important step forward in the debate on the political causes of the repression.

While these contributions were based on the conviction that these political experiences had important elements to offer for struggles for social and political change in the present, this was not the case for the contributions of what I have called ‘outsiders’, mostly younger generations and members of academia. Some of these academics had once supported the revolutionary experience but had now distanced themselves from it. These outsiders generally believed that there was little to be gained from the political experience, considering that it had been plagued by authoritarianism and that it was profoundly militaristic, anti-democratic and anti-political. The main stumbling block in this context was the use of political violence as a means to achieve social change. They considered that this choice was inherently authoritarian and had contributed to its failure. This is where profound differences emerged between former militants and outsiders about how to achieve social change, how radical this should be, and how to characterize democracy as a political system. In other words, the same ideological differences that constantly divided the human rights movement at large also strongly influenced and determined positions on the revolutionary experience.

The historical narrative over the past gained depth with the inclusion of the political memories of the former militants. Although the negative connotations towards the guerrilla organizations continue to prevail in many forums, a political and social space emerged that has enabled the version of the recent past that imposed itself in the 1980s to acquire a more nuanced character. Historical human rights organizations and relatives of the victims – that were previously reluctant to mention the political activism of their disappeared loved ones – are now more open about the subject and many of them publicly vindicate this political activism. At the same time, there are still important aspects of this experience that remain unexplored. Most of the testimonial literature on those years was written by former militants of the two main guerrilla organizations, the Peronist Montoneros and to a lesser extent the Marxist-Leninist PRT-ERP. Investigations into this period have also concentrated on these specific organizations. Therefore, far more is known about these experiences than about other political experiences, such as the combative unionism and the workers movement in general, which also played a crucial role in the political process of the 1970s. This observation shows that there is an important relation between the personal memories of agents of memory, and the historical experiences that come to predominate in collective memory at a certain period in time.

Kirchner’s presidency: the institutionalization of truth, justice and memory

The participation of new actors in the struggle for truth, justice and memory since the 1990s was further enhanced by political and institutional changes under Kirchner. In May 2003, Kirchner was elected President of Argentina, and under his presidency a process of institutionalization of the demands of truth, justice and memory set in. Kirchner had himself been a political militant in the 1970s, and openly acknowledged his previous political activism. This contributed to creating a political space in which former militants were able to tell their stories. Furthermore, he embraced the language of ‘truth, justice and memory’ of the human rights movement, and took a number of measures in these realms that corresponded to long-term demands of the movement. He combined symbolic gestures with important
institutional measures, particularly in the realm of memory and justice. Among the most important changes that this political context brought about was the reopening of the possibilities for legal prosecutions of human rights violators. In the realm of memory, the concrete measure to create a ‘Space for Memory and Human Rights’ in the former ESMA importantly contributed to the intensification of a public reflection on the recent past. In this debate, new and old actors, both state representatives and non-state actors, especially members of the academia, joined in discussing how to remember the recent past.

These developments can be seen as signs of the success of the human rights movement. Although a combination of factors explains the changes in the political and institutional context from 2003 onwards, it is fair to say that it would not have occurred without the constant activism of the human rights organizations. Furthermore, the human rights movement significantly shaped the contours of these political and institutional changes. The measures that Kirchner adopted, as well as the terms in which he referred to the recent past, were those of the human rights movement. It was significant that in his inauguration speech Kirchner named ‘truth and justice’ as the foundations of democratic governance, and that he recalled his own political activism in the 1970s as something he was proud of, officially challenging the theory of the two devils. His alignment with the human rights movement, and particularly with the organizations of victims, was even more explicit when he stated ‘we are the children of the Mothers’. In practice also, there were signs of alignment with the set of beliefs of the human rights movement. Justice arose as a central issue in the new political context, and the measures adopted in the realm of memory, such as the recovery of the ESMA, were a direct response to demands of the human rights movement. These developments reflected the public legitimacy that the human rights movement had acquired over time.

However, these same achievements also challenged the movement. Chapter six discussed the consequences of Kirchner’s presidency for the strategies and internal and external relations of the movement, reflecting the difficulties encountered in adjusting to the new political context. Chapter seven analysed the consequences of the combination of a more pro-active state on matters of the past, with the growing involvement of ‘newcomers’, especially academics and others contributing from a professional interest, for the position of the human rights organizations in the construction of memory. It intensified a dispute over who has the political power and moral right to decide about the past, that had already been visible in the context of more localized projects such as the case of El Olimpo. The case of the ‘Space for Memory and Human Rights’ in the ESMA shows that difficulties multiplied when the elaboration of a national memory was at stake. Both developments were strongly conditioned by the public re-emergence of conservative forces that defended the military regime, a counter-movement that found expression in a wave of verbal and physical threats and culminated in the disappearance of one of the witnesses in the trial against a former commissioner.

The new political and institutional context that emerged under Kirchner forced the various human rights organizations to reconsider their political position towards the national state. Ideological differences within the movement led to different interpretations of the new political context, and consequently also of their own role in that political context. Those who emphasized the coercive role of the state and saw the democratic state mostly in terms of continuities with the dictatorial state were critical of Kirchner’s policies. They considered that he did little to deal with socio-economic inequalities or to substantially reform the security
forces. They opted for strengthening their role as oppositional actor, seeking alliances with the opposition and holding the state accountable for both old and new violations of rights. A larger group within the human rights movement, however, considered that the democratic state was substantially different from the dictatorial regime, and that the new political context offered significant opportunities. They aimed at the further institutionalization of their demands, and their activities became increasingly intertwined with institutional politics. Whereas under previous governments, legal and institutional strategies had been mostly oriented towards pressuring the state, especially the executive, the human rights organizations now worked jointly with the executive to pressure other branches and state institutions such as the judiciary, the armed forces and the police.

The choices made by each organization were the subject of intense debates both within these organizations and between them. Conflicts arose within the movement, leading to fragmentation where previously there had mainly been heterogeneity. Those who were critical of the government accused the more cooperative organizations of having been co-opted, and for downplaying new violations as being less dramatic than the violations committed during the dictatorship. Those who chose for cooperation, on the other hand, considered that these oppositional sectors were playing the cards of the conservative opposition, and defended themselves by recalling that when dealing with the past, they were also dealing with the crimes of the present. Each party constructed images of one another that did not necessarily correspond with reality but that contributed to create cleavages within the movement. Differences about how to relate to the state and how to combine the dual role of human rights organization and of ‘agent of memory’ constituted an important source of tensions.

The case of the ‘Space for Memory and Human Rights’ in the ESMA shows the consequences of a state that assumed a more pro-active role in the construction of memory, combined with the multiplication of actors involved in the debates over the past. Major differences emerged in this context over how ‘thin’ or ‘wide’ the message (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002: 35) that the site conveyed should be, and how inclusive the debate over the past could be. A rough dividing line emerged in this context between academics or ‘professionals of memory’, and human rights organizations and victims. Professionals generally pleaded for a restricted message that would permit a large audience to identify with it, and that would permit the plurality of memories over the past to express itself. By contrast, human rights organizations and victims pleaded for an all-encompassing narrative, including issues that, according to the first group, were still open to debate, such as the revolutionary experience of the 1970s and the continuities in economic policies between the past and the present.

The position of the human rights organizations was to a certain extent conditioned by the re-emergence of voices justifying state terrorism. The fear of losing some of the terrain gained over the years often led human rights organizations to adopt a more protective attitude about their achievements. This attitude was questioned by professionals of memory, who considered that this set unnecessary limits to the debate and reflections on the past. It created taboo areas and made it difficult to speak about the more delicate issues of the past, such as civilian responsibilities and the psychology of victimizers. Both in the context of the ESMA and in other memory projects and debates, these differences led to legitimacy disputes. In these disputes, victims and human rights organizations claimed their moral right to speak and decide on matters of the past, appealing to their long history of resistance and struggle. Professionals and specialists on the other hand pointed to the fact that, as professionals, they were less biased than the victims and human rights organizations.
Struggling with the past: lessons from Argentina

We have seen throughout this book that the ‘memory process’ in Argentina has been extremely sensitive and that complex political processes have influenced the terms of the debate. A number of lessons can be drawn concerning the Argentine politics of memory that are also relevant for the study of similar processes elsewhere.

A first lesson points to the importance of taking into account the internal heterogeneity of any collective undertaking. It is not enough to acknowledge this heterogeneity, it also needs to be analysed. The case of the human rights movement in Argentina shows that there can be many different positions among actors making similar claims, and these differences affect the relation that a movement or group has with other political actors. There are complex internal dynamics going on within a social movement, which significantly affect both their internal and external relations. If we overlook these internal dynamics, we are unlikely to fully understand why social movements and other forms of collective action unfold the way they do, and what this tells us about how they relate to their political and social environment. Nor will we be able to understand the often heated debates that occur in the context of struggles for social and political change.

The Argentine case reminds us of the importance of two more elements that need to be taken into account in the study of social movements and collective memory: individual and collective identities, and the political context. It shows that it is necessary to look at both individual and collective identities when we try to understand how and why people make certain political choices. We need to look at the role of identity in how people interpret the political context and in the choice for a cooperative or a confrontational strategy towards the state. In Argentina, identity and personal history have proven to be important factors in explaining how people choose their alliances, their interpretation of both past and present, and the strategies they adopt. People's personal experiences during the military dictatorship, and political and social identities then and now, have been of great importance in determining their political choices. A person who participated actively in the revolutionary movement in the 1970s will choose to emphasize other aspects of the past than a relative who lost a loved one. Similarly, victims have had different motivations for participating in the struggle for memory than someone who has been interested from a professional perspective. Even the support for certain politicians has been conditioned by these factors. Kirchner for instance was able to receive support from many human rights activists and former militants because they saw him as someone who had been on their side during and after the military dictatorship and who spoke the same symbolic language.

These individual and collective identities, in their turn, have been influenced by the political context. The political context proves crucial if we want to understand how memory processes unfold: the way the past is dealt with is the result of the dynamic interaction of agents of memory with their social and political environment. It is in these interactions that public memory is shaped. More specifically, the Argentine case shows how visions of change for the present strongly affect interpretations over the past and what to remember of it. The content of memory is dictated by the needs of the present, and consequently, by one's interpretation of these needs. It is what agents of memory aim for in the present and in the future that determines what they consider important to remember or forget. This connection between the struggles of the past and the present is crucial to understanding the process of remembering in Argentina. The unfulfilled promises of democracy, such as the deepening of socio-economic
inequalities under democratic governments and new violations committed by police and other security forces, have strongly influenced the debates over the recent past. The past has often been appealed to as a means of transforming the present. From this perspective, a memorial or museum is not only a place for remembering the past, it is also an instrument for achieving social and political change. Similarly, establishing responsibilities for past violations is not just about responding to the victims, but is also part of a broader project of social, political and institutional change. This intricate connection between the present and the recent past has been both a source of collective action and a source of tensions. Disputes have arisen over how to interpret the present and what kind of social change is needed, with positions constantly shifting as a consequence of changes in the political context.

This book also shows that the study of the dynamic interactions between agents of memory and their social and political environments benefits from a (long-term) historical perspective. Studying changes over time helps us to understand why some things can be said and others are hushed up; why some words are too sensitive to be used; and why political struggles unfold the way they do. Additionally, such a historical perspective benefits from an ‘ethnographic eye’, taking into account the local dynamics and cultural understandings specific to the context in which these developments unfold. This enables us to understand why, for instance, in many countries the notion of ‘reconciliation’ is used by agents of memory in relation to claims about the past, whereas in Argentina human rights activists have strongly rejected this concept. This position can not be understood outside the specific context of Argentina, where Menem used reconciliation to justify the adoption of presidential pardons for those who had been previously condemned for gross violations of human rights.

The Argentine case confirms the theoretical argument developed in the introduction of this book that memory is a highly political undertaking in which different social and political groups compete to make their vision of the past hegemonic, leading to mnemonic battles. While much of the literature on collective memory states that memorials, commemorations and other mnemonic activities can have a ‘healing’ effect (see for example Wagner-Pacifici 1991), the Argentine case shows that they can also provoke or revive social conflicts. Studies of memory processes elsewhere reveal that this not exclusive to Argentina. In Israel for example, the memorial activities enacted to commemorate Rabin’s death are ‘characterized by diversity and fragmentation along the most critical dimensions of remembrance: time, space and discourse’ (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002: 30). In South Africa, the transformation into a national monument of Robben Island, the location of one of South Africa’s most infamous prisons during apartheid, was a difficult process. Deacon (1998) shows that there has been a tension between the island’s role as a national symbol of triumph over apartheid and the memories of individual prisoners and their families, for whom the island also represents a place of sorrow and suffering. A similar tension exists between the island’s celebration of the anti-apartheid struggle and the individual memories of those who did not take part in this struggle or who were ‘on the other side’. Deacon insists on the need to create a space in which the diversity of accounts is acknowledged and articulated. Finally, in his book on memorials and monuments of the Holocaust throughout the world, Young (1993) describes how these places become a source of dispute between conflicting memories.

In Argentina, conflicts have emerged not only between agents of oblivion and agents of memory but also among the agents of memory themselves. These conflicts have concerned both the content and the forms of remembering. Two related elements, however, are
constantly recurring features in these disputes. The first one is a major tension that has become increasingly visible in recent years in Argentina between those for whom memory is a moral and existential cause, and those for whom memory is an object of study. In Argentina, both positions often coincide with a division between human rights activists and victims of the repression on the one hand, and professionals working on memory – especially academics – on the other hand. Whereas for human rights activists and victims memory is intricately linked to the quest for legal justice, and with a moral duty to remember, professionals question this, as well as the premise frequently maintained in this context that memory will prevent repetition. These professionals tend to have a more detached approach to the past and think of memory in terms of knowledge production, from which moral and political lessons might eventually be extracted. They establish a less direct connection between memory and social and political change than human rights activists and victims do. Human rights activists and victims have difficulties understanding this position because they consider that it fails to acknowledge the political stakes in the struggle for memory.

The second element that is a constant source of dispute is the question regarding who has the moral and political rights to speak about the past and decide what should be part of collective memory. It is a direct consequence of the vast plurality of memories that often exists among citizens on periods of gross violations and political violence. In Argentina, there is a great diversity of viewpoints on how and what to remember and for what purpose. This plurality of visions has multiplied since the mid-1990s and brought to the fore the question concerning who ‘owns’ the process of memory in Argentina. This has become one of the most burning issues in the struggles over the past in the last few years. Who is the most legitimate spokesperson on matters of the past? What should be the role and position of the victims of the repression in this context? What should be the role of human rights organizations? What should be the role of professionals? This issue has found expression in a dispute over legitimacy criteria, in which ‘old’ and ‘new’ actors, victims and non-victims, activists and professionals question each other’s authority. The debate on the legitimacy to speak about the past is not limited to Argentina and has been tackled extensively in studies on the Holocaust and other traumatic episodes in history. Positions in this context are roughly divided between those who attribute a privileged position to victims of terror, and those who consider that to learn from the past it is necessary to go beyond the personal experiences of suffering and include other voices. This debate is currently taking place in Argentina.

Finally, the case of Argentina shows that in societies that have to deal with a legacy of terror, the passing of time does not necessarily contribute to closure. The situation in Argentina illustrates that unmet demands for justice can lead to a situation in which the past dominates the political landscape for various decades. In Argentina, the search for justice has been a driving force for human rights organizations and victims of the dictatorship engaged in the struggles over the past. Now that the road to justice has been reopened, the human rights trials have come to occupy a central place in the public debate on the recent past. However, the past nevertheless continues to be a contentious issue and the reopening of human rights trials remains controversial. There are still judicial employees who oppose and even obstruct the trials. Many suspects of human rights violations have gone into hiding and no active policy to trace them exists. Those who are arrested often enjoy privileged treatment instead of being sent to common prisons. Meanwhile, witnesses, human rights activists and employees of the judiciary involved in the trials continue to receive threats. While the government has adopted some measures to deal with these problems, human rights organizations still warn
that if not accelerated, the trials will not end before 2024, and will put a heavy burden on
the judiciary and on the political process. At the same time, radically opposed historical
interpretations of the recent past continue to co-exist without signs of reaching a consensus.
These observations lead to the conclusion that the struggles over the past in Argentina are far
from over.