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

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

In Argentina, the military dictatorship that held the country in its grip between 1976 and 1983 continues to occupy a central place in the public and political debate. Official attempts to close the subject have been strongly opposed by human rights activists, journalists, intellectuals and artists, who have managed to keep the past on the public agenda. This study focuses on this human rights movement and its struggle for truth, justice and memory as it has unfolded in the years after 1983. Through a historical analysis of this struggle, and the dilemmas that emerged in this context, the research aims to gain insights into the ways in which Argentina has given meaning to the period of the military dictatorship. The study addresses the following key analytical question: how has the struggle for truth, justice and memory of the Argentine human rights movement evolved over time in a dynamic interaction with its social and political environment? The research is organized around two main lines of inquiry. The first is oriented towards analysing the actors who have been trying to keep the past on the agenda, the ‘agents of memory’: who are they, what motivates them, what are their goals, their strategies and their political projects? The second line of inquiry is concerned with how these agents of memory interacted with their political and social environment, how they were influenced by it, but also how they managed to transform it.

Methodologically, the research combines a historical and an anthropological perspective. It offers both a broader historical account of the developments that have unfolded over time since the beginning of the 1980s, and more detailed case studies that enable an analysis of the micro-dynamics of the human rights movement and its interactions with its social and political environment. The study focuses on the period from the democratic transition in 1983, until the end of 2006. However, the centre of gravity of the study and especially the discussion of the case studies, lies in the period from 1996 to 2006. From the second half of the 1990s, the subject of the recent past gained importance in public opinion, and public attention has only increased since then. Geographically, the study concentrates on the capital city of Buenos Aires, the political, economic and demographic heart of the country.

Analytically, this study draws upon different insights. The literature on transitional justice and democratization helped to contextualize the Argentine case and to understand the institutional and political constraints that societies face in the aftermath of terror. The Argentine case stands out through the persistence and creativity of the Argentine human rights movement. Insights from the literature on collective memory helped to unravel the social and political process through which historical narratives come about and evolve over time. Particularly useful was the theoretical argument that struggles over the meanings of the past are inherently political, even more so when concerning painful historical episodes. Furthermore, the present context constantly influences people’s understandings and interpretations of the past. The study widely confirms these theoretical insights. Finally, the social movement perspective made possible an analysis of the reasons behind the emergence and unfolding of different initiatives pressing for truth, justice and memory, and provided
tools to analyse the role of the human rights movement in the public debates on the recent past.

The first chapter introduces the methodological and theoretical framework of the book. The subsequent chapters develop the argument of the book and are organized according to a chronological and thematic logic. Chapter two discusses the transition to democracy in 1983, and the official policies that were adopted by the newly-elected government to deal with the human rights violations of the military dictatorship. It argues that the human rights movement that emerged during the military dictatorship became an important actor during the transition to democracy and was able to shape the contours of the accountability process. How to deal with the human rights legacy became one of the central issues of the transition, and it was Raúl Alfonsín, the presidential candidate who promised to unravel the truth about the disappearances and prosecute the culprits, who won the elections in 1983. As soon as he assumed presidency, Alfonsín created a truth commission and promulgated a decree ordering the prosecution of three of the four military juntas that had served under the dictatorship. At the same time, he built in some conditions to limit the trials and avoid the condemnation of the armed forces as an institution.

Both the truth commission and the trial of the juntas became foundational events of Argentine democracy. The report of the truth commission 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 this interpretation and de-legitimized the voices of the military in favour of the victims. But the measures were also foundational in another way. They were guided by a narrative of the past that suited the needs of Argentine society at the time: the so-called ‘theory of the two devils’. According to this narrative, the military dictatorship was the result of a confrontation between the guerrilla organizations and the armed forces, each one bearing equal responsibility for the violence that characterized the period. Society was caught in the middle, a victim of the violence unleashed by both demons. This theory was institutionalized under Alfonsín and shaped the debate over the recent past in subsequent years. It contributed to a lack of debate on the role of civil society in the advent of the military dictatorship. The consequence was an interpretation of the recent past in which there was no room for analysing the political causes of the repression.

This de-politicized interpretation of the recent past was increasingly challenged from the mid-1990s onwards. After the trial of the juntas, Alfonsín returned to his initial idea to limit the trials. He was also increasingly under pressure from the armed forces, who, by means of several uprisings protested against the prosecutions. This situation led to the adoption in 1986 and 1987 of two laws that institutionalized impunity for the crimes of the past. The institutionalization of impunity was further consolidated after the Peronist Carlos Menem took over presidency in 1989 in a context of economic crisis and hyperinflation. Among his first measures were the adoption, by decree, of two presidential pardons, including a pardon for the junta leaders who had been condemned in 1985. The measures marked the retraction of the state from the matters of the past and initiated a period of public silence on the period of the military dictatorship that lasted until the mid-1990s.

Chapter three discusses these developments, focussing on the 1990s. It describes how the state increasingly moved towards the institutionalization of impunity for the crimes of the dictatorship, and how the past irrupted on the public scene again from the mid-1990s onwards. The chapter describes the various developments that led to a renewed attention
for the recent past within Argentine society and analyses how the human rights movement was able to break with a period of isolation and gain renewed strength as an oppositional actor. The movement was able to reformulate demands according to new circumstances by emphasizing the continuities between the past and the present in terms of human rights violations, pointing at impunity as the phenomenon that connected both. The movement further combined a legal and institutional strategy with non-institutional strategies. It used legal mechanisms to oblige the state to assume responsibility for the crimes committed under the military regime, and searched for loopholes in the law so as to make legal prosecution possible. At the same time, through campaigns and alternative forms of protest – such as the public denunciation of victimizers in their homes – it sought to influence public opinion and create awareness among ordinary citizens. In this context the construction of a collective memory forcefully emerged as a field of activities in its own right. It was seen as a means to counter denial and impunity and as a means to prevent a recurrence in the future.

From the second half of the 1990s, the human rights movement found increasing societal support for its demands. This support found expression in the growing participation of new actors in the struggle for truth, justice and memory, including students, neighbourhood commissions, and former members of the revolutionary movements of the 1970s. The participation of these actors led to new expressions of memory, as well as to new debates on the recent past and how to remember it, which were also strongly influenced by the institutional, political and economic crisis of 2001-2002. Chapters four and five analyse the growing complexity of the debate as a consequence of the involvement of these new actors.

Chapter four discusses the decentralization of memory initiatives to the neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires and the establishment of physical markers of memory throughout the city. This phenomenon converged with various initiatives to recover buildings and places that had been used as secret detention centres during the military dictatorship, and transform them into memory sites. The chapter focuses on the concrete case of the struggle to transform former secret detention centre El Olimpo into a memory site. Located at the heart of one of the neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires, the site was occupied during the 1990s by the Federal Police. From the mid-1990s local neighbourhood organizations, accompanied by human rights organizations, survivors of El Olimpo and relatives of victims, mobilized to pressure local authorities to relocate the police and transform the place into a memory site. The involvement of neighbourhood organizations was an important distinguishing element in the case. This involvement reflected a broader appropriation within civil society of the demands for truth, justice and memory, but also enhanced the potential for internal conflict over how and what to remember. An entirely new dynamics arose when, under Kirchner’s presidency, the state accepted the removal of the police and transformed the place into a memory site. The group of actors diversified, as human rights organisations, survivors of El Olimpo, and even the local authorities of Buenos Aires became more actively involved in the project. Serious disputes arose over the role of the state in the project, over what memory to construct in El Olimpo, and over who had the right to decide upon these issues.

Chapter five focuses on the debate that developed from the mid-1990s onwards concerning the years of social and political protest of the 1970s, and more specifically, on the revolutionary experience. This debate was a direct consequence of the participation, after many years of silence, of former members of the politico-military organizations in the public debate on the recent past. Personal traumas and a generalized public condemnation of the revolutionary experience had long prevented former militants from speaking about
their past experiences. From the 1990s onwards, the growing societal interest for the years of the dictatorship stimulated them to break the silence. The second half of the 1990s saw the appearance of a great number of predominantly testimonial works. Many of these publications and documentaries explicitly aimed at deconstructing the theory of the two devils. They wanted to show that far from being a ‘devil’, the revolutionary movement of the 1970s had been composed of an idealistic youth fighting for social justice. These attempts were criticized for idealizing the experience and ignoring more delicate topics, and contributed to a debate on how to evaluate the revolutionary experience of the 1970s, which continues until today. In contrast to the 1980s, the subject is now openly debated, and the historical interpretation of this experience has gained in depth through the inclusion of the political memories of the former militants.

An important development which contributed to this new space to discuss and even vindicate the revolutionary experience of the 1970s was the election, in May 2003, of a president who had himself been a political militant of the left in the 1970s. The Peronist Néstor Kirchner was the first president to be elected after the political, institutional and economic crisis of 2001-2002, and under his presidency a process of institutionalization of the demands of truth, justice and memory was set in motion. Kirchner campaigned on an agenda that established a break with the neoliberal policies, the corruption and the impunity that had prevailed in the 1990s. Dealing with the crimes of the military dictatorship through truth and justice rather than reconciliation and impunity was a fundamental part of this agenda of moral and political change. As soon as he assumed presidency, Kirchner adopted a number of measures in response to long-term demands of the human rights movement. These included the annulment of the impunity laws, leading to the reopening of the human rights trials, and the creation of a Space for Memory and Human Rights in the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA), one of the biggest secret detention centres during the military dictatorship.

Chapters six and seven analyse the consequences for the struggle for truth, justice and memory of a government that adopted the language of the human rights movement. Chapter six focuses on how the new political context affected both the strategies and the internal dynamics of the human rights movement. Kirchner’s policies on matters of the past were a direct response to the demands of the human rights movement, and can be seen as a sign of its success. At the same time, the advent of a sympathetic government proved to be an important challenge for organizations that were used to operate in the opposition ranks. Chapter six shows how the various participants in the movement made different evaluations of the Kirchner administration, and subsequently developed different strategies in the new political context. Whereas a majority of the human rights organizations considered the new government to be a positive development offering new opportunities, and accepted some levels of cooperation, a small but vocal group chose to remain in the opposition ranks. Underlying these opposed interpretations were ideological differences on how to conceptualize the state in a democratic context and how to understand the relation between the state and civil society organizations. Internal heterogeneity turned into fragmentation, thus seriously weakening the movement.

Chapter seven analyses how two major developments of recent years affected the struggle for memory: a state that plays a proactive role in the construction of memory, and a growing multiplicity of voices participating in the debate. The chapter focuses on the case of the ESMA and the debates that unfolded from 2004 onwards over what content to give to the new Space for Memory and Human Rights. The ESMA offers a particularly
interesting case for discussing the challenges and dilemmas that arose in this context of state involvement and growing diversity of actors. Although located in the city of Buenos Aires, the involvement of national authorities made it one of the central arenas in which national debates on memory found expression. Secondly, the project attracted a wide range of different actors, especially academics and other individuals interested in the construction of memory from a professional point of view. Important differences arose among these actors concerning the content to be given to the future museum of memory. At the heart of many of these debates was the question of how inclusive the message of the future museum should be. A rough dividing line emerged between professionals of memory, who pleaded for a restricted message that would permit a large audience to identify with it, and human rights organizations and victims of the dictatorship who wanted to impose some limits on pluralism. As a consequence of these differences, legitimacy disputes arose over who had the moral and political rights to speak about the past, which recalled those observed in the case of El Olimpo. The terms of the debate were also conditioned by the re-emergence of voices vindicating state terrorism.

The concluding chapter offers some answers to questions posed in the introduction. The study concludes that the human rights movement has played a crucial role in shaping both the contents of public memory and the ways in which the past is dealt with at the institutional and political levels, and was extremely successful in both seizing and creating political opportunities. At the same time the different actors involved in the struggle for truth, justice and memory display significant diversity in strategies, visions of change and interpretations of the recent past. This has made the struggle for memory in Argentina an extremely sensitive and even conflictive process. Conflicts have arisen over the contents and forms of remembering, the role of the state in this process, and the question concerning who has the moral and political right to decide upon these issues. In this sense, the Argentine case confirms the theoretical argument developed in the introduction of the book that memory is a highly political undertaking, in which different social and political groups compete to impose their vision of the past. This struggle cannot be reduced to a mere conflict between those who want to ‘forget’ and those who want to ‘remember’, as heated debates equally unfold among those who are striving for similar goals.

The chapter ends with some comparative lessons. In the first place, the study draws attention to the importance of the internal heterogeneity of collective projects and social movements. The case of the human rights movement shows that many different positions can exist among actors making similar claims, and that these differences affect the relation that a movement or a group has with other political actors. Secondly, the study highlights once again the importance of taking into account individual and collective identities when trying to understand how and why people make certain political choices. Past experiences significantly determine how people choose their alliances, how they interpret the past, and what strategies they choose to achieve social and political change. The study also highlights the role of the political context in the ways that collective action and memory processes unfold. In Argentina, the struggle for memory was the result of the dynamic interaction between agents of memory with their social and political environment. It is in these interactions that public memory is shaped. More specifically, the case shows how the content of memory is dictated by people’s interpretation of the needs of the present. There is an intricate connection between the struggles of the past and the present that is crucial to the understanding of the process of remembering in Argentina. The past is often invoked
as a means of transforming the present, and this is both a source of collective action and of tensions. Finally, the Argentine case shows that in societies confronted with a legacy of terror, the passing of time does not necessarily contribute to closure. In Argentina, unmet demands for justice have led to a situation in which the past has dominated the political landscape for several decades, and continues to do so in the present. The human right trials now taking place all over the country and the continued heated debates over the historical interpretation of the dictatorship years indicate that the struggles over the past are far from over.