

From the “Victim Societies” to the “Societies of Victimisation”: The Memory of Military Atrocities in South America

It is virtually impossible to think about the memory of military atrocities without reference to the South American experience. Both terms “memory” and “military atrocities” are deeply ingrained in the contemporary history of South American societies. This chapter provides an outline of the central issues regarding the memory of military atrocities in contemporary South American societies, highlighting the historical shifts in the regional politics of memory. The first section outlines the problem, discussing how what characterises the politics of memory (the dispute over the meaning of past violence) begins at the very definition of what constitutes an atrocity. The section focusses on the normalisation of anti-communist values and, in particular, the dissemination of 20th century theories of counterinsurgency in Latin America as essential elements that paved the way for state terror during the cold war. The following section discusses the role of the language of human rights in practices of remembrance of military atrocities during regional processes of re-democratisation. I argue that liberal humanitarianism operated as an important register, translating previous demands of justice around the view of state terror as the breakdown of the rule of law and liberal democratic life. The section discusses what was lost in translation in the mainstreaming of humanitarianism. The final section discusses the new politics of

memory in South America, highlighting the differences introduced by new groups of activists and scholars who are beginning to question the traditional ways in which military atrocities are remembered.

When Soldiers Misbehave

Remembering military atrocities is not an easy task. Those fighting to preserve the records of political violence must overcome a series of obstacles, such as censorship, societal apathy, veil and overt threats to their lives and the naturally difficult process of communicating to others what are essentially “unspeakable” acts. But they also face problems of a different nature; more fundamental challenges associated with the production of historical narratives about the past. We are used to thinking of stories and tales as being defined by what they say, but the truth is that they are equally, if not more so defined by what they leave unsaid: the omissions, the silences, and the blind spots that permeate every account of every event. All narratives, from personal accounts to history books, effect and are affected by the more or less arbitrary decisions on where and when to begin, what to focus on, and which lessons to extract from the past.

The first issue faced by practices of memorialisation of military atrocities is the very definition of what is to be remembered. What are military atrocities? How do we spot them? What makes them different from normal military behaviour? The problem is compounded

by the need to pin down what exactly is the atrocious part of a profession that, amongst other things, involves the potential killing of other human being. It means identifying instances when soldiers (and other agents of the state) sept out of line, and “mishaps” that could stretch from singular acts to decades of abuses, sometimes implicating the entire state apparatus. Just war theorists have spent copious amounts of time and effort trying to answer this question, but their answers often miss the point of what is essentially political about the memory of military atrocities: the fact that accounts of war crimes, torture, mass killings, and other appalling events are always about something more than these events themselves and their perpetrators. They are about the delineation of which forms of violence are identified as atrocious and which ones are taken for granted as socially acceptable. No discussion of the politics of memory in South America can begin without acknowledgment of this fact.

The subject of atrocious violence committed by agents of state, or private individuals working on its behalf, is no strange to South American history. From 15th century accounts of Spanish conquistadores who fed their war dogs with the flesh of indigenus prisoners¹ and the mass beheading of dissidents in 19th century Imperial Brazil,² to recent false positive

¹ María Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–59.

² The event in question refers to the *Guerra de Canudos* (War of Canudos) between imperial forces and a peasant settlement. You can find more about it here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0205w53>

scandal in Colombia,³ examples of gruesome “mishaps” abound. In fact, it is hard not to see them as anything but normal (in the sense of their everyday occurrences). Notwithstanding, the literature on the memory of military atrocities in South America tends to focus on its contemporary history and the legacies of state terrorism.

One could say that condemnations of “state terror” are almost as old as modern states themselves. The very appearance of the term terror in descriptions of political violence dates from the 18th century and has nothing to do with South America (it refers to the aftermath of the French Revolution).⁴ But the term was only truly popularised in the late twentieth century (1970s-1980s), partially through the efforts of human rights activist seeking to name and shame the civic-military dictatorships in the Southern Cone. Coups d’état had been part and parcel of military “misbehaviour” throughout South American history, but the military coups of the late twentieth century have attained a special place in both the memory and historiography of violations of human rights in the region. Military atrocities became a centrally sanctioned state policy during the Military Juntas in Argentina (1976-1982) the succession of unelected military presidents in Brazil (1964-1985), and the dictatorial reign

³ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/19/colombia-false-positives-killings-general-mario-montoya-trial>

⁴ Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1987); Richard Jackson, Eamon Murphy, and Scott Poynting, *Contemporary State Terrorism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

of Hugo Banzer in Bolivia (1971-1978) and Pinochet in Chile (1973-1988). To these overt instances of military takeover, we could add the “state of exceptions” enacted by the Turbay (1978-1982) and Betancur (1982-1986) democratic governments in Colombia and the *auto golpes* (self-coups) of Bordaberry in Uruguay (1973) and Fujimori in Peru (1992). Military atrocities committed by agents of authoritarian regimes or under period of exception were shocking not only for their gruesomeness and inhumanity, but also for the systematicity with which they were implemented and the callousness of their concealment (the denunciation of abuses was treated, across the region, as conspiracy theory). South American regimes were termed and are remembered as “terrorists” because they triggered moments when state agencies consciously and intentionally perpetrated atrocities in order to disseminate fear and secure their political goals. In the Chilean case, state terror is seen as representing a true historical break with the myth of a longstanding democratic tradition. Elsewhere, these regimes are remembered in an almost paradoxical fashion as being both more of the same and yet distinctively different.

The sanctioning of systematic atrocities as a state policy to control the opposition does not have a single historical root. Once again, one could claim, following the classic works of

Michel Foucault⁵ or the more contemporary reflections of Mark Neocleous⁶ and Patricia Owens⁷ that violence is a more or less constant historical element in the relationship between the modern state and those who have no place in its vision of the status quo. Although often overlooked by the literature, belief systems and hierarchies inherited from colonisation played a part in the emergence of state terror. The Argentine Junta was preceded by a long tradition of nationalist-fascist movements that glorified violence and militarism, imagining the Argentine republic as the natural successors of the Spanish Empire's crusade to evangelise the new land).⁸ In Brazil and Chile, the regimes nurtured a vision of indigenous peoples as impediments to progress and implemented exclusionary and violent development projects that greatly affect those communities. The military's plan to continue the colonisation of the Amazon Forest in Brazil was filled by a number of atrocities (ranging from massacres and land-grabbing to the intentional introduction of smallpox to isolated communities) affecting the Waimiri Atroari, the Yanomami, and the Nambikwara, to name some of the 30 indigenous groups affected. Pinochet's pioneering implementation of neoliberal policies in Chile

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, and Francois Ewald (New York: Picador, 2003); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

⁶ Mark Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

⁷ Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁸ Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

reverted the land reform enacted by Allende's socialist government (1970-1973), further marginalising the Mapuche.

Another element, more easily identified by historians, was the pervasive sense of anti-Communism in the region. Communism had been denounced by conservative segments of South America as an immoral foreign ideology that corrupted catholic and family values at least since the early 1920s. In general terms the fear of a communist insurrection came to replace old colonial fears of a looming slave or peasant revolt in the imaginary of the creole elites, dependent as they were on a politico-economic order based on the stark inequality created by the latifundia system. Despite this natural animosity, communists and socialists were tolerated, enjoyed electoral gains, and were even praised for their role in the Spanish Civil War and the struggle against fascism.⁹ But in the 1940s and 1950s, what had been a natural animosity was transformed into a virulent paranoia and propelled to the mainstream of the political scene.

Communism became an umbrella term, encompassing all perceived subversions of the traditional order of American societies (from Marxist-Leninism to feminism, 60's folk music, vagrancy, and even pornography). It is at this point that calls to fight the "red menace" were

⁹ Alan Angell, "The Left in Latin America since c. 1920," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America, Vol. 6: 1930 to the Present, Part 2: Politics and Society*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 163–232.

used to justify the persecution of left-leaning activists, politicians, and union leaders as well as for the condonement of atrocious violence. Communist parties in Brazil and Chile were banned in 1947 and 1948, respectively.¹⁰ The Tenth Inter-American Conference of Caracas 1954 included a resolution (espoused by the United States government) condemning communism as a threat to Pan-American peace.¹¹ Military takeovers in Argentina in (1966 and 1976), Bolivia (1971), Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973) were justified as the necessary interventions of the Armed Forces in the political realm to safeguard South American societies from the looming dangers of communist immorality. Even democratic regimes were amenable to the radicalising force of anti-communism. Arming bands of citizens to fight against the spread of international communism was made legal in Colombia in 1965.¹²

Importantly, this process of radicalisation was particularly influential within military circles, leading to a paradigmatic change that would greatly impact on the institutionalisation of state terrorism in the region. South American forces were not exactly averse to venturing into politics, having long constructed an institutional image as the protectors of national values and last-resort defenders of the political order. Since the end of the 1800s, officers were

¹⁰ Angell.

¹¹ Angell.

¹² María Teresa Ronderos, *Guerras Recicladadas: Una Historia Periodística Del Paramilitarismo En Colombia* (Bogotá: Aguilar, n.d.).

enthusiastically consuming essays that talked of an all-encompassing social and political responsibility of military institutions, such as Colmar von der Goltz's *Das Volk in Waffen* (The Nation at War) (1883) or Hubert Lyautey's *Du rôle social de l'officier* (On the social role of the officer) (1891) and *Du rôle colonial de l'armée* (On the colonial role of the army) (1900).¹³ But this historical predilection was somehow intensified in the 1950s when South America became one of the central laboratories of deployment and redevelopment of new doctrines of counterinsurgency.¹⁴ This body of knowledge, later known as the *doctrine de la guerre révolutionnaire* (doctrine of revolutionary warfare), was a loose compilation of essays by French war veterans such as Roger Trinquier, Charles Lacheroy, and Jacques Hogard explaining the reasons for the French defeat in the wars of decolonisation of the twentieth century. In sum, and despite specific differences they claimed that the rise of international communism and the age of anti-imperialism had changed the very nature of warfare. Battles were no longer to be fought against a traditional foreign unit with a specific strategic goal, but between a massively organised, invisible enemy that despite being externally funded was capable of merging, and therefore, becoming indistinguishable from, the civilian

¹³ Frederick M. Nunn, "Foreign Influences on the South American Military: Professionalization and Politicization," in *The Soldier and the State in South America: Essays in Civil–Military Relations*, ed. Patricio Silva (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

¹⁴ J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

populations.¹⁵ The new, revolutionary war was relentless and limitless. The enemy no longer fought only on the battle fields, but on all spheres of social life (including parliaments, labour unions, educational settings, the arts, broadcasting stations). Aggression was no longer declared, but secretly and insidiously carried out through psychological methods aimed at winning *des cœurs et des esprits* (the hearts and minds) of colonised populations. The French military failed, because it failed to recognise this “state of war without war”,¹⁶ and that the total war waged by international communism had to be met by the total mobilisation of the Armed Forces: a psychological counter offensive that was equally relentless and unbound in the struggle to protect western, capitalist civilisation in all aspects of social life.

These principles were enthusiastically adopted and adapted by the military intelligentsia in the countries of the Southern Cone. From the mid-1950s onwards, military journals in Argentina and Brazil began to republish the work of French reservists; their respective Superior War Colleagues became centres of dissemination of the new doctrine.¹⁷ Between 1956-1962, Argentina hosts the first course on revolutionary warfare in the region and

¹⁵ Michael P.M. Finch, “A Total War of the Mind: The French Theory of La Guerre Révolutionnaire, 1954–1958,” *War in History* 25, no. 3 (2018): 410–34.

¹⁶ Finch, 423.

¹⁷ Maud Chirio, *A Política Nos Quartéis: Revoltas e Protestos de Oficiais Na Ditadura Militar Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2012).

welcomes a French military mission.¹⁸ The Chief of Pinochet's political police, Manuel Contreras, testified in 2003 about the role played by French veteran and torture apologist Paul Aussaresses in the organisation and training of South American secret services.¹⁹ The United States Department of Defence would play no minor part in the dissemination of counterinsurgency techniques in the region. The ties between North and South American Armed Forces were strengthened in the post-war years, as part of an overall project of hemispheric defence. This included the commitment from the United States to provide the know how and material conditions required for the further professionalisation of Southern militaries, with particular focus on their intelligence apparatus. Set up by the Department of Defence's Southern Command in Panama in 1946, the infamous School of the Americas (SOA) would become a vital centre of dissemination of counterinsurgency techniques in Latin America. By the end of the 1960s, the SOA produced around 22,000 graduates.²⁰

Prominent during the Vietnam War (1955-1975), exported to Central America in the 1980s, and resurrected after the more recent Afghanistan and Iraq invasions (2003-2011),²¹ the French doctrine had a particularly bleak facet: the overt justification, if not glorification, of

¹⁸ Mario Ranalletti, "Réexaminer La Question de l' Implantation de La 'Doctrin de La Guerre Révolutionnaire' En Argentine," *Histoire@Politique* 34 (2018): 1–10.

¹⁹ McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*.

²⁰ "SOA-WHINSEC Graduates," accessed September 23, 2020, www.soaw.org.

²¹ Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social*.

atrocities as legitimate methods of counterinsurgency and the acceptance of the production of widespread fear as an element of social control. In the words of Charles Lacheroy, the new war over the hearts and minds of populations could lead to a point where “butchers” would fare better than “generals”.²² As I will disclose in the next section, Lacheroy’s dictum was assimilated with mastery in South America, especially in the Southern Cone, where the newly instituted military dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s elevated gross violations of human rights into a state policy. Each dictatorship set up bureaucratic behemoths specialised in intelligence and counterinsurgency, operating through heterogenous taskforces involving members of the army, navy, air force, the police and even civilian paramilitary death squads. With the active support of the CIA, working as liaison between different branches, the dictatorships persecuted political opponents beyond their national territories. The multiple historical efforts to map and document the legacy of state terrorism in the Southern Cone have uncover a macabre litany of military atrocities: hundreds of thousands forced into exile; countless arbitrarily detained and tortured; children who were separated from their

²² Jacques FréMeaux, “The French Experience in Algeria: Doctrine, Violence and Lessons Learnt,” *Civil Wars* 14, no. 1 (2012): 49–62.

“subversive” parents and raised by the families of their assassins; and their most paradigmatic crime, the thousands of “disappearances” of political dissidents.²³

From the revolution to the revelation: human rights enter the scene.

The violent anti-Communist crusade waged by South American militaries left a terrifying trail of disappearances. 30,000 went missing in Argentina, more than 2,000 in Chile, and hundreds in Brazil, Bolivia (including the mythical guerrilla leader Ernesto Guevara) and Uruguay. South American officers were not only applying the principles of the French doctrine but were also innovators in methods of political repression. In many cases, disappearances were a response to the work of human rights activists and exiles who denounced the crimes of the military to the world. By vanishing with the bodies of dissidents, the military created a sense of plausible deniability.²⁴ With no body, there is no crime and in the absence of a crime there is no room for accountability. It is in this sense that we can speak of a practice of memorialising military atrocities (or the lack thereof) even before the end of military regimes, during their most violent periods. Forced disappearances provided a way to multiply the effects of killing (through the dissemination of fear and uncertainty amongst

²³ Juan E. Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen, and Manuel Antonio Garretón, eds., *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

²⁴ McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*; Paloma Aguilar and Iosif Kovras, “Explaining Disappearances as a Tool of Political Terror,” *International Political Science Review*, 2018, 1–16.

dissidents) while denying that the act of killing ever took place. Military atrocities in the Southern Cone were first “remembered” by being immediately forgotten.

But the military’s innovation was met by innovations produced by social movements demanding the liberty of political prisoners, the punishment of torturers, and most of all, the right to know the whereabouts of the disappeared. By denying whole families a most necessary moment of closure and an end to their grief, the military unintentionally politicised what would otherwise be individual instances of mourning and created a powerful new opposition to state terror.²⁵ In the mid-1970s, when state terror turned to the method of disappearances, family members began to join the struggle to expose the military atrocities in South America *en masse*. Spear headed by the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the Women’s Movement for Amnesty in Brazil, and the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared (AFDD) in Chile this movement came to represent the most serious opposition to military regimes. They were capable of mobilising large sways of South American society, enjoying the vital support of human rights groups, such as the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) founded in 1979 in Argentina, progressive segments of the Catholic church, such as the Vicaría de la Solidaridad in Chile

²⁵ Henrique Tavares Furtado, *Politics of Impunity: Torture, the Armed Forces and the Failure of Transitional Justice in Brazil* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

and Comissão Justiça e Paz (CJP) in Brazil, local Bar associations, and even forensic anthropologists.

These important allies could mobilise their technical knowledge and international contacts, weaving a network for the documentation, archiving and “naming and shaming” of atrocities that included IOs and INGOs such as the World Council of Churches, Amnesty International, and the Inter-American System of Human Rights.²⁶ Empowered by the turn to humanitarianism by the Carter Administration in the US (1977-1981), their legal-forensic activism mobilised remembrance for the protection of human rights,²⁷ creating a viable language in which to frame the demands of political activists in ways that appealed to wider middle-class, liberal segments.

Aside from the provision of solidarity to family members of those victimised by the state (including forms of legal, spiritual, psychological support), human rights activists were focused on gathering testimony and documenting atrocities. Their primary target was the staged denial and the police of “forgetfulness” by official authorities, who either concealed

²⁶ Magret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Lawrence Weschler, *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers*, 1995; Louis Bickford, “The Archival Imperative: Human Rights and Historical Memory in Latin America’s Southern Cone,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1999): 1–21.

²⁷ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Elizabeth Jelin and Pablo Azcarate, “Memoria y Política: Movimiento de Derechos Humanos y Construcción Democrática,” *América Latina Hoy* 1 (1991): 29–38.

military atrocities or embarked on campaigns of misinformation, blaming disappearances on guerrilla infighting. By carefully documenting the figures of political repression, releasing lists with the names of the disappeared and even risking their lives to secretly photocopy official papers, human rights activists aimed to dissipate the fictional smokescreen produced by the military. They intended to show, with robust forensic evidence, that atrocities were part of a state policy, carefully designed and brutally executed with the knowledge and condonement of the highest ranked officials. It is in this sense that we can speak of this movement in a double humanitarian and memorial facet: a form of political resistance against the military and their regime of obliviousness via the remembering of military atrocities as part and parcel of a period of institutionalised terror.²⁸

Southern Cone activists were highly influential. Similar activist groups started to appear in Latin America and in 1981 a Latin American federation of associations of family members of the disappeared (FEDEFAM) was founded.²⁹ This period of activism would produce some of the most interesting innovations in the field of transitional justice, including the use of DNA databanks to identify the mortal remains of disappeared and truth commissions, such

²⁸ Furtado, *Politics of Impunity*.

²⁹ The story of the FEDEFAM can be found here, alongside a list of organizations that take part in the network: <http://www.desaparecidos.org/fedefam/index.html>

as the Argentine Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP).³⁰ It was also marked by the production of lengthy volumes containing the testimony of survivors and describing the actions of military regimes in their minutiae, the famous *Nunca Más* (Never Again) reports that were produced officially by the CONADEP in Argentina in 1984 and unofficially in Brazil and Uruguay in 1985 and would set the template for future investigations around the world.³¹ The process of mobilisation of the categories of international law, such as victimhood, gross violations of human rights, and crimes against humanity, was also transformative. Slowly, but progressively, allied groups promoted the global mainstreaming of South American “innovations”, including the addition of new types of crimes and rights to the scope of international humanitarianism (such as the crime of forced disappearances and the right to the truth).³²

South American activists are usually treated in the singular, as under the banner of a united struggle for human rights. But, in reality, individuals and groups who opposed military regimes in the region were far from homogenous. The joining of forces between survivors of torture, former guerrillas, family members of the disappeared, feminists, syndicalists, human

³⁰ Emilio Crenzel, “Argentina’s National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons: Contributions to Transitional Justice,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2008): 173–91.

³¹ Louis Bickford, “Unofficial Truth Projects,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (2007): 994–1035.

³² Dermot Groome, “The Right to Truth in the Fight against Impunity,” *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 29, no. 1 (2011): 175–99.

rights activists, and liberal international allies required a delicate balance that was, at times, riddled with internal conflict. Events such as the Russell Tribunals in the 1970s evidenced not only the shared commitment to name and shame perpetrators of atrocities, but also the many fractures that constituted these movements. When some maintained their commitment to support only “prisoners of conscience”, like Amnesty International did,³³ others, like the Feminists for Amnesty in Brazil, emphasised their unbound solidarity with all victims of authoritarianism (including the guerrilla).³⁴ While legal professionals from the Global North showed excitement over the prospects of strengthening international criminal law, others feared that centralisation of responses to military atrocities in IOs based in the Global North could override local activism in the Global South.³⁵ When we read the newsletters produced by different groups we see that emphasis on the a-political, in particular non-Marxist nature of their activism³⁶ ran side by side with deeply political claims about the power of South American oligarchies or the use of Marxian-inspired terms such as juridical-political

³³ Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

³⁴ Heloisa Amélia Greco, “Dimensões Fundacionais Da Luta Pela Anistia” (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2003).

³⁵ Jamie Rowen, *Searching for Truth in the Transitional Justice Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³⁶ See, for example, the statements issued by the *La Vicaría de la Solidaridad* in Chile. Available here: <http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-3547.html#documentos>

superstructure.³⁷ In the end, the strength of these movements as mechanisms of change during transitions to democracy lied in their capacity to articulate fairly open concepts of accountability, liberty, and justice. The more open-ended, the more likely these ideas were of galvanizing support from the most diverse segments of society.

Nevertheless, this openness also came with a price: the side-lining of certain meanings and practices of justice that became apparent with the progressive adoption of the language human rights as the privileged language of struggles against the military regimes. On one hand, the support of international humanitarian networks opened many doors for survivors of torture and family members. By framing their political demands in terms of universal rights and translating accountability in terms of criminal punishment they provided both a clear pathway forward and a clear idea of how justice should be served (in the courts, by punishing those guilty of misbehaving and restoring the rule of law). This legalistic, and, as it was said at the time, more “realistic” idea of justice was markedly different from the wide and complex radical transformation of social relations advocated by the leftist groups of a not-so-distant past, from Salvador Allende’s Unidad Popular to Raúl Sendic’s Tupamaros guerrilla. The appearance of human rights activists in the scene was part of a shift in the

³⁷ This ambiguity can be seen in the newspaper of the Torture Never Again Group in Brazil. Available here: http://docvirt.com/docreader.net/docreader.aspx?bib=GTNM_Jornal&pesq=&pasta=1986&pagfis=609

symbolism and practice of resistance movements in South America; previously connected to the duty to make the revolution,³⁸ resistance became synonymous with the revelation of the archives of repression and the state's duty to punish perpetrators. And something very important was lost in translation.³⁹ The left's struggle was never aimed solely against a group of generals who condoned the practice of torture, but against a generalised system of exploitation. While human rights activists were concerned with the systematicity of atrocities (their recurrence and policy-oriented nature) previous movements were concerned with the systemic nature of capitalist/neo-colonial violence. The professed non-partisanship of many humanitarians replaced prior articulations of justice openly committed to taking the side of the oppressed. A more flexible and open notion of violence (roughly coterminous with perceptions of injustice) gave way to a concept of violence reimagined as a set of violations of human rights listed on the United Nations Charter.

Not all that was lost must be mourned. It is true that a good deal of the documents of leftist organisations dwelled on technicalities and dogmas regarding the methods to bring about a revolution. It is also true that within the so-called new left,⁴⁰ some clandestine groups who

³⁸ Ernesto Guevara, *Escritos Revolucionarios* (Madrid: Catarata, 1999).

³⁹ Henrique Tavares Furtado, "The Memory of Militarism and the 'Value' of Resistance: An Analysis of the Resistance Memorial of São Paulo," *Critical Military Studies* 6, no. 3–4 (2020): 376–96.

⁴⁰ Timothy P Wickham-crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Ricardo Melgar, "La

opted for the armed struggle accepted militarism uncritically and to excessive limits. The extreme consequences of this ultra-militaristic style of militancy were the estimated 30,000 deaths caused by Sendero Luminoso's popular war in Peru.⁴¹ It must be recognised that we can find plentiful examples of *mea culpa* from former members of the armed struggle in the vast testimonial literature that appeared in the wake of processes of "pacification".

But in the end, the primacy of the language of human rights reinforced prevailing narratives that at the turn of the millennium attributed an essential utopic, if not "dangerous", nature to the left's agenda. Visions of radical social change were condemned as necessarily leading to the militarisation of militancy and, perhaps most importantly, a certain ethos of refusal – the refusal to accept the world as it is – was demonised in favour of an ethos of compromise and parsimony (reducing socio-political phenomena to legal solutions). This trope was greatly reinforced by figure of the former-communist in Latin America (ranging from literary personalities to politicians sharing a common regretful stance towards their past activist) that became quite prolific at the turn of the century. In many instances, the message was to throw the baby away with the bathwater.

Memoria Sumergida: Martirologio y Sacralización de La Violencia En Las Guerrillas Latinoamericanas," in *Movimientos Armados En Mexico, Siglo XX*, ed. Verónica Oikión Solano and Marta Eugenia García (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán: CIESAS, 2008), 29–68.

⁴¹ Kimberly Theidon, "Justice in Transition: The Micropolitics of Reconciliation in Postwar Peru," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 3 (June 1, 2006): 433–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002706286954>.

Victims societies or Societies of Victimisation?

The framing of the quest for accountability in the language of human rights produced an internal tension between different conceptions of justice that was never truly erased from struggles against political violence in South America and elsewhere. Ultimately, fundamental differences about readings of the past, of the scope and sources of violence, of the meaning of political resistance, and the goals of justice coinhabited the symbolism and practice of human rights activists since the 1970s. From its early days, the human rights movement had been characterised by a split between those arguing for a minimalist agenda – focusing on civil and political rights – and those demanding the expansion of such right to incorporate socio-economic and even cultural elements.⁴² If the colonisation of demands for justice in terms of a humanitarian language tended towards the former during the transitional to democracy in South America, this compromise would be short lived. Soon, the political mobilisation of those mourning victims of military atrocities in the region would demand the expansion of the liberal agenda (or even reject it altogether).

⁴² James W. Nickel, “Rethinking Indivisibility: Towards A Theory of Supporting Relations between Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2008): 984–1001.

Nowhere was this change clearer and more symbolic than in the case of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. A section of the Madres took a turn to the left, became increasingly vocal against neoliberal reforms in Argentina, precisely when mechanisms of accountability – who used the Madres as their prime example of the successful story but failed to consider socio-economic violence – were being mainstreamed worldwide.⁴³ In Brazil, historical victims of military atrocities were joined by new groups who began to demand the investigation of the disappearances and state-led killings that continued into the democratic transition. Together these organisations connected the lack of proper accountability for the military atrocities during the cold war to the normalisation of violence in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s.⁴⁴ In Colombia, the mid-2000s witnessed the re-articulation of claims of victimhood that questioned the official narrative of the civil war as a clash between paramilitaries and the guerrillas, emphasising the often-overlooked collusion between the state and right-wing extremists.⁴⁵ In Chile, scholars and activists are criticising the exclusion

⁴³ Virginia Morales, “Reconfiguraciones Identitarias En La Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo : Lucha Contra La Impunidad , Radicalización y ‘ Giro a La Izquierda ’ (1983 -2003),” *Izquierdas* 34, no. Julio (2017): 125–49; Elizabeth Borland, “Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo En La Era Neoliberal: Ampliando Objetivos Para Unir El Pasado,El Presente y El Futuro,” *Colombia Internacional*, no. 63 (2018): 128–47, <https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint63.2006.06>.

⁴⁴ Furtado, *Politics of Impunity*.

⁴⁵ Nadia Tapia Navarro, “The Category of Victim ‘From Below’: The Case of the Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE) in Colombia,” *Human Rights Review* 20, no. 3 (2019): 289–312, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-019-00558-w>.

of the Mapuche people from traditional mechanisms of accountability and the narratives remembering Pinochet's terror.⁴⁶

Much has been discussed about the capacity of these new or rearticulated movements to change substance and meaning of human rights, proposing a more transformational approach to the practice of accountability. But regardless of whether the new memory activism can successfully expand our conceptions of human rights, they also represented a more fundamental tension between the memory of post-conflict/post-authoritarian societies as either "victim societies" or as "societies of victimisation". Historically, the predominance of the language of human rights as the *lingua franca* of demands of justice showed a tendency to privileged particular representations of the past; memories that may acknowledge military atrocities as gruesome crimes but emphasise the image of "victim societies". This image is created by a particular memory of violence in the past as an exceptional occurrence, a misuse of military authority (a violation of rights) that corrupts the course of normal politics after a coup d'état. This image tends to preserve the sanctity of liberal democratic societies (reimagined as the victims of the military) by representing liberal politics as the taming of violence within the civic sphere. It also tends to forget about the role of bystanders and

⁴⁶ Daniela Jara et al., "Tracing Mapuche Exclusion from Post-Dictatorial Truth Commissions in Chile: Official and Grassroots Initiatives," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 12, no. 3 (2018): 479–98, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijy025>.

collaborators, or to whitewash their acts as facilitators of violence by reclaiming their identities in the aftermath as also victims of irrational terror.

The new politics of memory in South America goes against this trope, insisting on an image of South American societies as “societies of victimisation”: social and political formations that, by virtue of their reliance on structural forms of violence (racism, economic exclusion, exploitation and patriarchy) continuously produce atrocities on a daily basis. Refusing to stop at the punishment of servicemen, they demand their collaborators be held accountable and remembered as criminals – especially the business elites who financed and continue to finance death squads, many a times benefiting from state terror. In a sense, their struggle demands a broadening of the category of perpetrators, disputing tradition views of who the “bad guys” are supposed to be. Their demand for justice encompasses rights other than the right to free speech and assembly, the right to life or freedom from mistreatment. At times, it becomes a demand to reimagine the world as it is, for the sake of a more egalitarian and just one.