Re-politicizing the memory of the 1970s in post-dictatorship Argentina

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Between March 1976 and December 1983, a repressive military regime was in power in Argentina, responsible for thousands of people disappearing, being imprisoned, or assassinated. The majority of the victims were citizens who had been engaged in some kind of social or political activity, and who had spoken up for social justice. A large proportion of them had been enrolled in one of the many organizations of the revolutionary left that flourished under the military dictatorship of 1966-1973. This dictatorship, known as the *Revolución Libertadora* [Liberating Revolution], was characterized by a growing political polarization. The suppression of civil and political rights, in combination with an international context of the Cold War, sparked resistance movements among workers, students and the lower ranks of the Catholic Church, motivated by ideas of social change and revolution. Sources of inspiration were as diverse as the Cuban Revolution, the student protests of May 1968 in France, and the liberation struggles in the colonized world. A process of political radicalization set in among these sectors, in which the use of armed struggle became increasingly seen as a means to achieving social change. At the beginning of the 1970s, politico-military (or guerrilla) organizations emerged, the Marxist-Leninist Ejército Revolutionario del Pueblo [People's Revolutionary Army, ERP], and the Peronist Montoneros being the two most important ones. The Montoneros received the support of former president Juan Domingo Perón, who had become the central figure of the opposition during his exile in Madrid.[1] The organization experienced an exponential growth following its strategic alliance with the Juventud Peronista [Peronist Youth, JP]. This alliance provided the organization with a mass movement, which came to be identified as the Tendencia Revolucionaria [Revolutionary Tendency] within the Peronist movement.

The organizations of the revolutionary left, both armed and unarmed, were a political actor of great significance in the 1970s, mobilizing thousands of people. Nevertheless, despite its political importance, this experience was collectively silenced after the transition to democracy in 1983. Public references to the revolutionary left were mostly done in simplifying terms, and in the numerous testimonies of survivors and

[1] R. Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón: Argentina's Montoneros* (Oxford 1982) 40.

relatives of the disappeared, political affiliations were systematically omitted. It was only from the mid-1990s that a public space emerged for those who had participated in the revolutionary movement of the 1970s to speak up and share their memories. In this article I propose to analyse how this silence came into being in the 1980s, and why and how it started to crumble from the mid-1990s onwards.[2] I will argue that personal difficulties of former militants to speak up about their past political projects and ideals interacted with a hegemonic narrative, the so-called 'theory of the two devils', which heavily stigmatized the guerrilla. Later on, in the mid-1990s, individual and collective processes again interacted to create a societal interest in the memories of the former militants of the 1970s. From the end of the 1990s onwards this group was able to promote a different, more complex and multi-layered account of the revolutionary experience of the 1970s. In this process, a multi-vocal counter-narrative[3] emerged that also revealed the fragmented and divided character of the memories of those who had participated in the revolutionary left.

Such an analysis of how the social and political conflict that unfolded in Argentina in the early 1970s has been remembered over the years will deepen our understanding of silence as a constitutive dimension of memory. The case illustrates how silence is constructed and de-constructed over time as a result of the interactions between 'different – and sometimes even conflicting – individual memories and society as a whole'.[4] In the face of a highly constricting social and political environment in which their memories are 'illegitimate', individuals can opt – consciously or unconsciously – for strategic silence.[5] Similarly, once these circumstances change, they can choose to leave silence behind and challenge dominant accounts through the production of counter-narratives, as happened in Argentina. The Argentine case also recalls us that what is remembered publicly is a matter

[2] This article is based on the author's PhD thesis *Struggling with the Past. The Human Rights Movement and the Politics of Memory in Post-Dictatorship Argentina (1983-2006)* (Amsterdam 2010).

[3] N. Adler e.a., eds., *Memories of Mass Repression. Narrating Life Stories in the Aftermath of Atrocity* (New Jersey 2011) xvii.

[4] Adler e.a., eds., *Memories of Mass Repression*, x.

[5] J. House, 'Leaving Silence Behind? Algerians and the Memories of the Repression by French Security Forces in Paris in 1961' in: N. Adler e.a., eds., *Memories of Mass Repression. Narrating Life Stories in the Aftermath of Atrocity* (New Jersey 2011) 137-156: 138.

of politics and power relations.[6] In Argentina, an official narrative 'demonizing' the guerrilla organizations was promoted by the state, setting the parameters for what memories were acceptable and which not. This was done with the intention to establish a different moral and political order after a period of great institutional rupture.[7] But in the process, it also became a powerful mechanism for inclusion and exclusion of certain subjectivities.[8] Consequently, this official interpretation led to contestation and counter-narratives which ultimately found their way into collective memory as the political power balance shifted and society was ready to hear these other voices. The following sections will analyse how this shift occurred.

Dominant narratives after the transition: the de-politicization of the 1970s

After the transition to democracy in 1983, the newly elected president Raúl Alfonsín implemented a human rights programme to deal with the legacy of the dictatorship, which strongly established the terms of the debate on the recent past. The most important measures of this programme were the instigation of a truth commission to investigate the fate of the thousands of disappeared, and the legal prosecution of those considered responsible for the situation of illegality and human rights abuses that had unfolded before and during the dictatorship. Both measures were designed with the intention to break with what the government considered to be 'historically rooted "insidious cultural patterns" of authoritarianism and political

[6] J. Taylor, 'Body Memories: Aide-Memoires and Collective Amnesia in the Wake of the Argentine Terror' in: M. Ryan ed., *Body Politics: Disease, Desire and the Family* (Boulder 1994) 192-203: 200; E. Jelin, *Los trabajos de la memoria* [The labours of memory] (Madrid 2002) 40; S. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998* (Durham 2004) 124-125.

[7] B. Groppo, 'Traumatismos de la memoria e imposibilidad de olvido en los países del Cono Sur' [Memory traumas and the impossibility of forgetting in the countries of the Southern Cone] in: B. Groppo and P. Flier eds., *La imposibilidad del olvido: Recorridos de la memoria en Argentina, Chile y Uruguay* [The impossibility of forgetting: pathways of memory in Argentina, Chile and Urugay] (La Plata 2001) 19-42: 25.

[8] Taylor, 'Body Memories', 200.

violence',[9] replacing them with a culture based on the rule of law. As such, they importantly contributed to a de-politicized account of the 1970s, in which there was no room for a more profound reflection on the complex landscape of radical social protest that had characterized the 1970s. The intervention of the judiciary was a means to de-activate both the narrative of the 'war' of the armed forces that had legitimized the repression, and the political cause that had motivated the actions of many of the disappeared. Its task was to establish responsibilities, identifying the perpetrators and the victims of violations. Political motives on both sides were irrelevant in this account.[10] The report of the truth commission, the *Nunca Más* [Never Again], responded to a similar logic. Following the frame of human rights reporting, the document focused on the facts of the repression but did not address the question of why the violence happened, nor did it mention political affiliations of the victims, with the exception of members of the unions.[11]

Underlying the official measures was a historical interpretation that became firmly entrenched in society, the so-called 'theory of the two devils'. This theory reduced the military dictatorship to a conflict between two groups in confrontation with each other, the military and the guerrilla, with society as the tragic victim of the conflict between these two factions.[12] According to Alfonsín and his advisors, there had been 'two terrorisms', on the side of the military and on the left, who were 'one side of the same coin',

[9] G. Grandin, 'The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History, and State Formation in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala', *The American Historical Review* 110.1 (2005) 46-67: 52.

[10] O. Landi and I. González Bombal, 'Los derechos en la cultura política' [Rights and political culture] in: C.H. Acuña e.a., ed., *Juicio, castigo y memorias: Derechos humanos y justicia en la política argentina* [Trial, punishment and memories: human rights and justice in Argentine politics] (Buenos Aires 1995) 142-192: 165.

[11] Taylor, 'Body Memories', 193; Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP) [National Commission on Disappeared Persons], *Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, Nunca Más* [Report of the National Commission on Disappeared Persons, Never Again] (Buenos Aires 2003) 375-376; E. Crenzel, 'Pensar el mal' [Thinking over evil], *Revista Puentes* 5.13 (2004) 65-70: 66.

[12] E. Crenzel, *La historia política del* Nunca Más. *La memoria de las desapariciones en la Argentina* [The political history of the *Never Again*. The memory of the disappearances in Argentina] (Buenos Aires 2008) 58.

in the words of the Minister of Interior Antonio Troccoli.[13] Both terrorisms were considered responsible for the generalized situation of illegality that had been characteristic of the military dictatorship. In accordance with this idea, Alfonsín not only ordered the prosecution of the military juntas, but also of the guerrilla leaders who had survived the repression. The theory of the two devils soon became the dominant account of the military dictatorship. This was not only due to official policies institutionalizing this narrative, but also because it built upon sentiments already circulating in society. The origins of the theory lay in the discourse of the military on the need to combat 'subversion', which permitted the acceptance of high levels of repression.[14] It was only gradually that society started to express indignation about the disappearances, when cases became known of people who did not fit into the stereotypes circulating on the guerrillas.[15] But even then, this did not lead to a vindication of this particular form of collective action. Rather, it led to a rejection of both the politico-military organizations and the illegal repression.[16] In the 1980s, the members of these organizations were still largely seen as terrorists, and the general opinion was that they should not have been killed but tried in court.[17] This rejection of illegality and political violence was accompanied by a strong revalorisation of democracy and the rule of law.[18]

One of the effects of the 'demonization' of the revolutionary left was that relatives of the disappeared and survivors started to omit their past political affiliations in their testimonies. Hierarchies were created among the victims, in which those who had no political record at all were 'greater' victims than those who had participated in guerrilla activities. This

[13] M. Osiel, 'The Making of Human Rights Policy in Argentina: The Impact of Ideas and Interests on a Legal Conflict', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 18.1 (1986) 135-178: 158.

[14] H. Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente: Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina* [Past and present: War, dictatorship and society in Argentina] (Buenos Aires 2002) 121.

[15] S. Ciancaglini and M. Granovsky, *Nada más que la verdad: El juicio a las juntas* [Nothing more than the truth: The trial of the juntas] (Buenos Aires 1995) 89.

[16] I. González Bombal, '"Nunca Más": El juicio más allá de los estrados' ["Never Again": The trial beyond the courts] in: C. Acuña et al. eds., *Juicio, castigo y memorias: Derechos humanos y justicia en la política argentina* [Trial, punishment and memories: Human rights and justice in Argentine politics] (Buenos Aires 1995) 193-216: 206.

[17] A.C.G.M. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia 2005) 323, 416.

[18] Crenzel, 'Pensar el mal', 67.

mechanism was enhanced by the attempts to demonstrate the magnitude of the repression and its indiscriminate character, which led to emphasizing those elements that proved the 'innocence' of the victims.[19] Argentine sociologist Inés González Bombal reflects on the general state of mind during the transition to democracy:

> In particular, the preoccupation revolved around the possible mistakes and irreparable injustices committed in the repression. In this sense, the information on children, pregnant women, the elderly, that is to say, those we could denominate as being the "hyper victims", was considered beyond the admissible.[20]

This differentiation between 'innocent' and 'guilty' victims led to systematic attempts by relatives and human rights activists to disconnect the victims from any kind of political activity which could make them 'guilty'. While in practice, most of them were politically involved and connected in some way to the revolutionary organizations of the left,[21] relatives consequently remained silent about the political activities of their beloved ones and at times even denied their participation in revolutionary organizations.[22]

Former militants themselves, who had survived the repression, unwillingly also contributed to the collective silence on the revolutionary experience of the 1970s that predominated in the 1980s. Feeling strongly stigmatized by a society that rejected anything that reminded of the political

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[19] F.G. Lorenz, "'Tomála vos, dámela a mí": La noche de los lápices, el deber de memoria y las escuelas' ["You take it, you give it to me": The night of the pencils, the duty to remember and the schools] in: E. Jelin and F.G. Lorenz eds., *Educación y memoria: La escuela elabora el pasado* [Education and memory: The school works out the past] (Madrid 2004) 95-130: 102.

[20] González Bombal, "'Nunca Más": el juicio más allá de los estrados', 206.

[21] M. Novarro and V. Palermo, *La dictadura militar (1976-1983): Del golpe de Estado a la democracia* [The military dictatorship (1976-1983): From the military coup to democracy] (Buenos Aires 2003) 488; J. Gasparini, *Montoneros: final de cuentas, edición ampliada* [Montoneros: Final reckoning, extended edition] (Buenos Aires 2005) 98.

[22] Interview with A.I., director of the Direction of Disappeared Persons of the Ministry of Security of the Province of Buenos Aires, and founding member of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) from 1986 until 2002, held in La Plata on 14 December 2004. Interview collection of the author. Informants interviewed for this research are referred to with (in some cases fictitious) initials to preserve their identity.

practices of the 1970s, most of them chose to remain silent. Furthermore, societal rejection interacted with personal difficulties of the survivors to process the experience of repression they had gone through. They all had suffered traumatic experiences during the military dictatorship. They had either survived 'disappearance', or been political prisoners, gone into exile or had been forced to hide in their own country, or a combination of these experiences. In all cases they had lost friends, relatives and fellow-militants, and had lost a project that had entirely structured their lives. The society into which they returned after having spent years in secret detention centres, prisons, or in exile, had been profoundly transformed as a consequence of the military dictatorship, and fitting back in was not easy. In general terms, all had to cope with feelings of guilt, moral judgements and with a lack of understanding for the complexity of the experience they had gone through. They also had to deal with the destruction of what had been a lifetime project. For years, survivors concentrated on reconstructing their shattered lives.[23] Necessarily, there was what historian Felipe Pigna calls a 'natural delay' in the public reflections on these experiences.[24]

The mid-1990s: re-connecting with the revolutionary experience of the 1970s

It was only well into the 1990s that this silence started to crumble. The mid-1990s saw a growing stream of books, documentaries, films and other cultural products on the revolutionary left, most of them from former militants.[25] Simultaneously, reflections and debates on the subject were

[23] For a more detailed account of the impact of the military dictatorship on the lives of former militants and survivors of the repression, see also: S. van Drunen, *Struggling with the past. The human rights movement and the politics of memory in post-dictatorship Argentina (1983-2006)* (Amsterdam 2010) 169-173.

[24] Interview with Felipe Pigna, history professor at the University of Buenos Aires and former member of the grassroots organizations *Unión de Estudiantes Secundarios* [Union of Secondary Students, (UES)], held in Buenos Aires on 6 June 2003. Interview collection of the author.

[25] In 1995, a first documentary *Montoneros. Una historia* [Montoneros. A story], from the thirty-five year old Andrés Di Tella, was shown on a small scale in the Cultural Centre Ricardo Rojas. The documentary told the story of Ana, a member of the organization Montoneros and survivor of the ESMA, one of the largest secret detention centres of the dictatorship. Her testimony was cross-cut with the

published in newspapers, and in academic as well as mainstream journals, and the subject became increasingly debated within the various societal initiatives focusing on the memory of the recent past. A number of developments stimulated former militants to share their memories. One of them was the emergence of a new generation demanding information on the 1970s and questioning the silence of their elders. In this context, the children of the disappeared played a particularly important role in breaking the silence of former militants. Many of them had grown up with little information on the militancy of their parents. They had generally been raised by their grandparents, or other relatives who did not necessarily know the details of the militancy of the disappeared person, or had even disagreed with his or her political choices. It was often when they were in their teens, halfway through the 1990s, that children of the disappeared started to investigate who their parents were. They were not satisfied with the image that existed of their parents as merely passive victims, and wanted to understand who they had really been. Their interest ranged from the political choices that had motivated their parents to the more personal aspects such as what things they enjoyed doing and what they used to laugh about.[26] In an attempt to reconstruct their own family story, they contacted

memories of other former Montoneros. In 1996, a few days before the twentieth anniversary of the military coup, the documentary *Cazadores de Utopía* [Hunters of Utopia] went into première in a movie theatre in the city centre of Buenos Aires. It was a compilation of testimonies of former members of the Tendencia Revolucionaria within the Peronist movement, of which the director and his assistants had also been part. That same year, Marta Diana, herself not a former militant but a classmate of former Montonera Adriana Lesgart, published *Mujeres guerrilleras* [Guerrilla women], a compilation of testimonies of women who had been members of various revolutionary organizations. In 1997, Eduardo Anguita, former member of the ERP, and Martín Caparrós, former member of the Tendencia Revolucionaria, published the first of a series of three testimonial books on the revolutionary experience of the 1970s entitled *La voluntad. Una historia de la militancia revolucionaria* [The will. A history of the revolutionary militancy]. These are some examples of publications and works on the revolutionary experience of the 1970s that were published in the second half of the 1990s.

[26] P. Bonaldi, 'Hijos de desaparecidos: Entre la construcción política y la construcción de la memoria' [Children of the disappeared: Between political construction and the construction of memory] in: E. Jelin and D. Sempol eds., *El pasado en el futuro: los movimientos juveniles* [The past in the future: youth movements] (Madrid 2006) 143-184: 162.

their parents' fellow-militants, hoping to hear who their parents had been and how they had lived their short lives.

These demands, coming from the children of the disappeared, stimulated former militants to tell more about their years of political militancy. It helped survivors to move beyond their role of witnesses of the horrors of torture and captivity in the secret detention centres. At a more public level, the organization of children of the disappeared (Hijos por la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio – Sons and Daughters for Justice, against Oblivion and Silence, H.I.J.O.S.) also contributed to creating a societal space for former militants to be more explicit about their previous political identities. From its first public appearances in 1996, the organization systematically remembered the disappeared as political militants. In one of the first public speeches of the organization at the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the military coup on 24 March 1996, the spokesperson of H.I.J.O.S. stated:

> We are proud of our revolutionary parents, and we assume the commitment to continue for memory and justice until the ultimate consequences. Twenty years ago, companions, our parents decided to have us. They knew that maybe they would not see the victory, they would not see the country that they were building, and they wanted us to see it. Companions, how are we not going to vindicate them?[27]

H.I.J.O.S. was not the first human rights organization to insist on the importance of remembering the disappeared as political actors, but its message was powerful because of the public attention that the organization received during its first years of existence.

Other developments also contributed to opening up a space for former militants. During the 1990s, a period of growing desillusionment with democracy set in, which led to questioning the idea so strongly embraced in the 1980s that democracy was the panacea for Argentina's social, economic and political troubles. As a consequence, the rejection of the social and political protests of the 1970s as exclusively violent and

[27] Quoted in: F.G. Lorenz, '¿De quién es el 24 de marzo? Las luchas por la memoria del golpe de 1976' [Who does the 24th of March belong to? The struggles for the memory of the military coup of 1976] in: E. Jelin ed., *Las conmemoraciones: Las disputas en las fechas 'in-felices'* [Commemorations: The disputes over 'unhappy' dates] (Buenos Aires 2002) 53-100: 87.

destructive also started to crumble, permitting a revalorization of these experiences. The first signs of this revalorization were perceived halfway through the 1990s amongst the different groups mobilizing around the memory of the dictatorship. But it was in the context of the social, economic and political crisis of 2001 that the decade of the 1970s started to be recalled as a period of widespread commitment to social change.[28] The radical character of the revolutionary struggles of the 1970s made it the closest antecedent to the anti-institutional manifestations of 2001-2002. This was also interpreted in this way by former militants, to whom the mobilizations of 2001-2002 brought back memories of the massive crowd mobilizations and excitement of the 1970s.[29] The social protests of 2001 and 2002 and the new forms of collective action that developed outside formal politics in that period, stimulated many former militants to become politically involved again.[30] This also led to a revision of past experiences and an evaluation of what might still be valuable in the present.

The presidency of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) that followed upon the crisis definitively opened up public space for former militants to revalorize their past affiliations and identities. Both Néstor Kirchner and his wife Cristina publicly recognized and vindicated their own participation in the Juventud Universitaria Peronista [Peronist University Youth - JUP], a grassroots organization responding to the Montoneros. In doing this, they 'whitewashed' the experience of militancy of the 1970s, as Marisa Sadi, former militant, formulates it:

> He whitewashes when he says 'I am the son of the Madres [the mothers of the disappeared], I am…I participated, I was there.' He whitewashes when he goes to the ESMA [an emblematic building that was used as a secret detention centre during the military dictatorship] and embraces the survivors, who were all Montoneros,

[28] Interview with L.P., journalist, former member of Montoneros and survivor of the ESMA, held in Buenos Aires on 27 September 2004. Interview collection of the author.

[29] Interview with F.C., former member of Montoneros and former political prisoner, held in Buenos Aires on 28 November 2004; interview with E.A., writer, former member of ERP and former political prisoner, held in Buenos Aires on 28 December 2004. Interview collection of the author.

[30] Interview with F.C., 28 November 2004; interview with I.P., former member of Montoneros and sister of a disappeared, held in Buenos Aires on 20 September 2004. Interview collection of the author.

> from the first one until the last one, from extremely well-trained and educated members (*cuadros*) to people that weren't, but he does it. So there you also see it. He whitewashes when he starts inviting former Montoneros to the various [government] areas.[31]

The presidential gestures and statements strongly contributed to de-stigmatizing the revolutionary struggles of the 1970s.

The voices of the former militants: multi-vocal counter-narratives

In the places they had rejoined socially, politically and culturally, former militants increasingly spoke up about their previous political identities. Some of them even explicitly tried to revive these old political identities, although adapted to the new context. But it was mostly in the cultural field, through the production of books, documentaries, in (academic) journals and in the media, that former militants were able to share their vision on the revolutionary project of the 1970s. The early works of the mid 1990s often had a testimonial character. They were clearly intended as a deconstruction of the theory of the two devils, and aimed at shifting the focus from the disappeared as victims to the disappeared as politically motivated actors.[32] Through the voices of the protagonists who talked about their experiences, their motivations and their hopes and fears, the authors of these works wanted to contribute to a better understanding of the militant experience of the 1970s. They also aimed at going beyond the tragedy of the disappearances and rescue those elements that had been part of the militant experience but were generally omitted when referring to the 1970s: the joy involved in being engaged in politics, the feeling that one was shaping the course of history, and the thrill of the whole experience.[33] These early works had a ripple effect and contributed to a change on how the experience of militancy of the 1970s was looked and reflected upon.[34]

[31] Interview with Marisa Sadi, writer, former member of the Juventud Universitaria Peronista and survivor of the ESMA, held in Buenos Aires on 19 October 2004. Interview collection of the author.
[32] A. Oberti and R. Pittaluga, *Memorias en montaje. Escrituras de la militancia y pensamientos sobre la historia* [Mounted memories. Writings of militancy and thoughts about history] (Buenos Aires 2006) 121.
[33] Oberti and Pittaluga, *Memorias en montaje*, 127.
[34] Ibidem, 119.

At the same time, once former militants started to share their memories and visions on the revolutionary left of the 1970s, the diversity and even conflicting memories of this experience became visible. Positions ranged from a-critical vindication to the rejection of the entire experience. In between, there were many variations. Within the two biggest politico-military organizations, the Montoneros and the ERP, a major dividing line ran between the surviving leadership who refused to critically revise its role in the failure of the revolutionary project, and those who blamed their leaders for having been careless with people's lives. The strongest criticism against the leadership came from those who had been involved in the grassroots organizations allied with the guerrillas, taking part in propaganda activities in the universities, secondary schools and factories, to so-called *perejiles*.[35] In much of the literature that was published in the 1990s, these grassroots militants appeared as the ideal counter-part of the militaristic leadership that had valued armed struggle more than politics. They were considered 'the real means of support of the revolutionary project',[36] those who, according to philosopher José Pablo Feinmann, 'took the responsibility. They believed in communitarian causes. They sought a better society. They did not die for being stupid. They did not die for nothing. They died for being generous.'[37]

Clearly, there was a need to vindicate this particular group, which had experienced a different reality from those higher in the hierarchy of the organization. Adriana Robles, former grassroots militant, wrote a book significantly entitled, *Perejiles. Los otros Montoneros* [Perejiles. The other Montoneros], revisiting her own memories and telling the stories of former fellow-militants, mostly members of the Unión de Estudiantes Secundarios [Union of Secondary School Students - UES]. In her introduction, Robles insists upon the need to show 'the other Montoneros', 'the *perejiles*, the less formed and less informed basis of the politico-military organizations. The

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

[36] M. Sadi, 'Desde la base' [From the grassroots], *Página 12*, 8 April 2001, 16-17.

[37] J.P. Feinmann, *La sangre derramada: Ensayo sobre la violencia política* [Shed blood: Essay on political violence] (Buenos Aires 1998) 105.

unknown, those who many do not know who they were',[38] those who remained in the shadows and occupied lower ranks.

While the testimonies of these 'other Montoneros' certainly contributed to present a more diversified picture of the revolutionary left than had predominated until then, they have also been criticized for unwillingly reproducing the moral logic of the theory of the two devils. Thus historian Federico Lorenz states:

> When facing the criticisms, many responded by reinforcing a stereotyped image, differentiating themselves but reproducing the dominant logic. If the guerrilla, for instance, was synthesized in some of its leaders, the answer consisted of testimonies to show that "we were not them", "we were not all like that". But ultimately one was confronting [criticasters] using the framework proposed by the dualism of the two demons.[39]

Similarly, sociologist Alejandra Oberti and historian Roberto Pittaluga have warned for the consequence of a memory based on a dichotomy in which militancy stood for positive values, whereas the negative aspects of the experience were attributed to the leaders. According to them, it did not enable the exploration of the politico-military organizations as the complex political and subjective entities that they were, and therefore could lead to uncritical memories.[40]

Former militants who saw the limitations of the normative terms in which the debate was unfolding started to plead for a more analytical perspective. They urged for an evaluation of the experience that would not fall into the trap of condemning or idealizing attitudes of former companions, and would not silence the more controversial issues that could contribute to the existing negative public image of the militant experience of the 1970s. An important contribution to this more analytical perspective was made by Pilar Calveiro, a former member of Montoneros, survivor of several secret detention centres, and also a political scientist residing in Mexico. Her first publication, *Poder y desaparición. Los campos de concentración en Argentina* [Power and disappearance. The concentration camps in Argentina],

[38] A. Robles, *Perejiles. Los otros montoneros* [Perejiles. The other Montoneros] (Buenos Aires 2004) 16.
[39] Presentation by historian F. Lorenz at the launch of the journal *Lucha Armada en la Argentina* [Armed struggle in Argentina] in Buenos Aires on 30 November 2004.
[40] Oberti and Pittaluga, *Memorias en montaje*, 99.

which appeared in 1998, was already an important contribution to the debate on the recent past, as it was one of the first serious attempts to analyse the repressive system in Argentina not as an aberration, but as a product of Argentine society.[41] These insights were elaborated further in Calveiro's second book, *Política y/o violencia. Una aproximación a la guerrilla de los años 70* [Politics and/or violence. An approximation to the guerrilla of the 1970s], dedicated to an analysis of the guerrilla organizations and their role in the process that led to the military dictatorship.[42] The book was also accompanied by a number of public presentations, which indicated, according to Oberti and Pittaluga, that 'its appearance constituted an opportunity to install new coordinates in relation to the debate on the organizations of the seventies'.[43]

Calveiro's main added value was that she analysed the decade of the 1970s as a political process. This permitted her to evaluate the contribution of the guerrilla organizations to the general climate that culminated in the military dictatorship, without falling into the trap of the 'two demons'. Instead of describing and telling, she tried to explain and analyse. This was different from the more testimonial approaches that had predominated until then and that mainly focused on the sentiments and ideals that had motivated the generation of the 1970s. Calveiro provided an analysis of where these sentiments came from, how they were embedded in a particular set of values, and what this meant for the way social protest unfolded in the 1970s. Her intervention was also different from earlier proposals because she insisted on the fact that although the defeat of the guerrillas had been part of a broader historical process, this could not be used as an excuse. The guerrilla organizations also had their share of responsibility in their own defeat, and this responsibility should be acknowledged and evaluated. In this context, Calveiro was particularly critical of those former militants who tended to use the theory of the two devils as a means to avoid reflecting critically upon their own role. Referring to an interview with the number

[41] P. Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición: Los campos de concentración en Argentina* [Power and disappearance: The concentration camps in Argentina] (Buenos Aires 1998); L. Pastoriza, 'Una Mirada que se abre al futuro' [A gaze that opens up to the future], *Revista Puentes* 5.13 (2004) 54-57: 57.

[42] P. Calveiro, *Política y/o violencia: Una aproximación a la guerrilla de los años 70* [Politics and/or violence: an approximation to the guerrilla of the 1970s] (Buenos Aires 2005).

[43] Oberti and Pittaluga, *Memorias en montaje*, 41.

one of Montoneros, Mario Firmenich, in which he affirmed that the theory of the two devils had been one of the instruments used after the transition to democracy to ostracize the Montoneros, she stated: '…they mix up the dirty war with the demand for accountability that people claim and that he (Firmenich) should give. He too uses the theory of the two demons to wash his hands of his share of responsibility'.[44]

Many former militants looking for other ways to reflect on their past political experience welcomed her interventions as 'a leap in the discussion'.[45] However, the theory of the two devils continued to cloud the debate. Criticisms against the revolutionary organizations were often seen as a confirmation of the theory, and therefore many former militants were afraid of being misunderstood if they spoke publicly about the most controversial decisions and practices of their organizations.[46] The sensitivity to the theory of the two devils was reinforced when judge Claudio Bonadío ordered the arrest of the three surviving leaders of the Montoneros in 2003, accusing them of being responsible of the abduction of fifteen Montoneros who had returned to Argentina in 1980 to resist against the dictatorship (the so-called 'Montonera counter-offensive').[47] Former militants interpreted his move as a means of re-floating the theory of the two devils and became even more cautious about what they said and what they did not say. Marisa Sadi, who was about to publish a book on the Montoneros, remembers that Bonadío's arrest order 'pestered her a lot'. When I asked her why, she answered:

> The demons. The demons, the demons. Then there were people who said to me: "It cannot come out, it cannot come out, […], because the demons, because…" The matter was complicated. I came across a much generalized attitude among the people I interviewed. They told you everything but in general the majority clarified "you can tell this, and this you cannot, you have to be careful, be aware because this cannot come out, we are not prepared" … things that sincerely … well, I have had some time bombs, like that, let's say, but in general it was information that not…of which I do not believe that it was something to say "this is something that cannot be told."

[44] Oberti and Pittaluga, *Memorias en montaje*, 22-23.
[45] Interview with L.P., 27 September 2004.
[46] Ibidem.
[47] V. Ginzberg, 'La conducción no tomó todos los recaudos' [The leadership did not take all the precautions], newspaper *Página/12,* 15 August 2003.

> I was very respectful. But there is this fear on the part of the ones who participated that we will not be understood.[48]

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

Conclusion

While during the 1980s there was little to no public space for former militants to share their memories of struggle and revolution, the balance shifted in the 1990s as a consequence of a number of developments. Generational change, but also changes in people's perception of democracy, social protest and political practice, led to a new scenery in which former militants willing to share their version of the 1970s were able to step in. The consequence has been that public acceptance of the memories of the revolutionary experience of the 1970s has greatly increased since the return of democracy in 1983. In the public commemorations and activities remembering the disappeared, their political militancy now has a prominent place, and few relatives of the disappeared will deny the political participation of their beloved ones. Similarly, in the media, academia, and other cultural forums the militant experience is openly discussed, and people who participated in the politico-military organizations of the 1970s do not silence their past political affiliations anymore. Countless books have been written on the topic, numerous documentaries and films been realized. Even in formal politics the taboo has been broken with the presidencies of Néstor Kirchner and his wife and now president of Argentina Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, as they have publicly vindicated their past political affiliations in revolutionary peronism. In this sense, the attempts of former militants to re-politicize the memories of the recent past seem to have been relatively successful.

At the same time, a number of cautionary remarks are in place. First of all, the acceptance of a more nuanced memory of the revolutionary endeavour of the 1970s is still limited to certain sectors within Argentine society. Beyond the circles of leftist intellectuals, politicians, artists, human rights activists and other representatives of the political left, there are still

[48] Interview with Marisa Sadi, 19 October 2004.

many settings where the revolutionary left is equated with terrorism. Secondly, the public vindication that is currently being made of the 1970s, especially within the Kirchnerist movement, is a stylized and polished version in which there is no room for the more delicate aspects of the experience, such as the choice for armed struggle and some of its deviations. This polished version focuses on certain values that were believed to be constitutive of that period, such as the search for social change, the solidarity, the ethics and commitment to the cause of social justice. It is, as sociologist Carlos Altamirano points out, a version that serves the purpose of constituting an identity, and as such it has a great symbolic value.[49] But it does not offer the more profound critical reflection that enhances our understanding of this particular historical period. Finally, historians have signalled that while there is now quite some information available on the politico-military organizations, other dimensions of the highly contentious 1970s have remained underexposed. This is especially the case for the experience of the combative unions and the workers movement, an absence that might be attributed to the fact that workers and their relatives have been less active in making public claims for the disappeared, lacking the 'cultural tools' and the relations to impel their demands.[50] Thus, while the public narrative of the 1970s has certainly gained depth with the inclusion of the political memories of former militants, there is still an urgent need for more solid historical research on this contentious historical period.

[49] J. Natanson, 'Kirchner trae una visión estilizada de los años 70' [Kirchner brings a stylized vision of the 1970s], *Página 12*, 17 February 2004.

[50] Interview with Federico Lorenz, historian, author of several publications on the memory of the military dictatorship, in Buenos Aires on 5 December 2006. Interview collection of the author.