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The unruly image: memory and transmission in Argentina.

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CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF MEMORY

Memory and Narration

In Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus enjoys the hospitality of the Phaeacians. Part of this warm reception is the songs of a blind bard, Demodocus, who sings about the story of the fall of Troy at the request of Odysseus himself. Odysseus has not revealed his identity to his hosts, but when he hears the song, he is unable to contain his emotions remembering all the events that he had experienced and he struggles to hold back his tears (Homer 8.72–92). To conceal them from his hosts, he covers his head with a blanket and lets his tears flow freely. This early passage of Western literature raises several issues with regard to our relationship with memory. Thanks to the song, Odysseus, the man of action, the versatile man, the *polytropos*, is emotionally affected to the point of tears upon discovering his intimate story told by others. A specific relationship is established (centuries before the emergence of tragedy and, much later, psychoanalysis) between memory and the renewal of pain, and between pain and catharsis (Sloterdijk). What stirs up Odysseus' emotionally charged memory is something external, an artistic artefact, rather than the progression of his own thoughts. In a certain sense, it could be said that what causes Odysseus to cry is an emotion in the face of events that can be recognized as being carried out by the same body, an emotion of and for identity, but this emotion is induced by the story that others have given about him. Odysseus thus discovers his *narrative identity* (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* 42–43) and the epic song to a hero who still lives allows the past to emerge as the past (Hartog 52).

The passage in question tells, among other things, of Odysseus' feats during the Trojan War, suggesting that the hero is hearing from the bard fragments of Homer's *Iliad*, which are presented in this passage of the *Odyssey* as a *mise en abyme*. In this passage, the song presents the conditions of its own reproduction. It could be said that the text educates its future readers about how they should read it, creating the conditions for engaged listening, for an environment of reception and for passing it down. The poem claims a fate for itself as a presentation of the past, as an indisputable record of decisive events in the form of a tribute to the heroes; that is to say, it thematizes the conditions of its own transmission. The *Odyssey* incorporates the images of other times into the horizon of the present, offering interpretative frameworks and certain hopes, and it does so through repeated group or collective listening and in a ritualized way (the conditions of the epic, festive recitation, rhapsody contests, etc.). The song of the bard here represents the epic of the text itself, called to be a foundational

connective structure (J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory* 2), an imperishable cultural product, that is, canonical and a particularly successful medium (because it survives, re-signified, to the circumstances of its appearance) of an eventual cultural memory not only of that Greek people but of all subsequent Hellenism. There is also a surprise and an interruption in these tears that Odysseus cannot hold back. It is clear that the hero, constantly on guard against the possible dangers of the present, was not prepared to hear his own story. His emotional *breakdown* has something to do with the surprise of encountering himself, encountering that piece of his own life objectified in song, turning his experience into a transmissible and shareable object. It could also be said that there is an interruption of an ongoing, diffuse, or undifferentiated present where the character lives immersed in multiple tasks that are always urgent and dangerous, with an eye on his next goals and the challenges and dangers ahead. This process of hearing his own story produces an inflection in this extended, ongoing, diffuse and undifferentiated present that is personal life, establishing a new difference in the hero's consciousness: one that divides the present in two, between a pure present and a present that has already been. On the other hand, what this passage of the *Odyssey* tells is affected by a slight anachronism, since it makes the "legend" coincide with its protagonist, a resource that Cervantes would use virtuously in *Don Quixote*. Thus, the song speaks of its own genesis, as if the song had arisen from the events it narrates. By memory organized as an oeuvre, a rift is established: the present turns towards itself and is problematised. The evocation of a time that *has already been* creates a shift, but also introduces an emotional difference in the relative affective indifference with which we live in the now. Odysseus' tears are the affective mark of a fissure in the present that creates a new absence: that of time gone by which, consequently, evokes the idea of finitude and, more specifically, the prospect of death. It could be said that the reference to the past creates or builds it (the past), and establishes a rift that introduces the now of lived experience to its discontinuity. And along with that introduction that challenges the pure present of lived time by confronting it *with its difference*, emerges, among other things, the pain for what is re-presented as lost.

But what is the relationship between lived experience and the present of remembrance? To what extent do Odysseus' tears revive the experiences of the past, his past adventures? Between lived and remembered experience there is an immeasurable ontological rift. Odysseus' emotions, though triggered by the bard's tale, are inevitably a matter of the present, involving distance and reflective elaboration. In a certain sense, the songs build a past (or even the past as such). In "The Storyteller", Walter Benjamin differentiates between two types of experience, *Erlebnis* (lived experience) and *Erfahrung* (experience as ethos),

identifying the latter with narration and memory. There would be no experience without narration. It is narration that consecrates a part of our experiences as memorable and, therefore, as transmissible. In narration, to which Benjamin even attributes functions of healing, a community can become reconciled with its past and shape its identity. A lived experience without narration only forms part of memory as trauma. As has been continuously pointed out in literature on trauma and memory, trauma is not an experience: trauma is a *failed experience* (van Alphen, *Failed Images*). This passage from the *Odyssey* presents certain keys to understanding the functioning of individual memory in its relationship with culture: the idea that beyond its neurophysiologic conditions, individual memory requires a certain type of material objectification on which to rely and, thus, a social environment; the idea that memory is fundamentally narrative; and the idea that memory always occurs in the present and divides it or opens it up for consideration. What re-activates the past as past is the anamnesis embodied in song, in art, at a time when narration and legend were not differentiated from History. And this song is jointly processed; it creates a circle of complicit listeners, who in turn will transmit it to their descendants. Homeric hymns were a specific way of organizing cultural memory, but these elaborate frameworks of remembrance and commemoration transcended the interactive and oral situation in which they were conceived, and a subsequent community, composed of much later generations, found in that specific form of narrative organization, crystallized in writing, a useful medium, a connective medium, to imagine an identity. This is how they became a cultural text. Whereas a literary text produces meanings that are not binding and are generally limited to the time in which the text was generated, the cultural text, according to Jan Assmann (*Cultural Memory*), acquires unequivocal and timeless status, as is the case in general with texts that become sacred.

In this sense, it could be said that every community is a cultural community organized around a text (not necessarily a book). The *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, the Bible, and the Popol Vuh, despite the great differences between them, are all tutelary texts around which a series of values and rhetorical figures, conceptions of time, space, the laudable and the abject, the good and the evil, constituting not only the self-image of a group but also a horizon of perception and thought, is preserved and transmitted. They are texts that do not need to prove their authenticity, because they function as a medium for storing and conveying cultural memory, that is, as texts that recall a heritage and texts that are also remembered as objects of cultural memory themselves. They are objects of tradition and archives of experience, what a community has decided to remember. As a cultural text, the *Odyssey* founded a heritage and

an identity that undoubtedly served as propaganda for the ruling castes, providing them with forms of social and cultural legitimacy (Adkins).

In this sense, the perfect consistency between the hero and the song that speaks of him is remarkable: crying here is not only the emotional symptom of a disturbance; it is also, in some way, an assent, a compliance, because the hero recognizes in the song his immediate past and, therefore, his tears are an involuntary homage to the bard Demodocus. On praising the bard, Odysseus tells him that it was as if he had witnessed the battle of Troy himself or that it had been recounted to him by someone directly involved, which seems to raise complex questions about the quality of the classic testimony and questions that history as a discipline would raise in the nineteenth century, i.e. the issue of sources, the fairness or veracity of versions about the past and the necessary evidential mechanisms. However, it is unlikely that Odysseus' praise is related to the historical or *pre-narrative* veracity of the song. What his tears show is that this song was congruent with the conventional ways of evoking the past in his cultural universe and consistent with the culture of memory and the horizon of meaning in which he was immersed. The truth in Homer's songs is still the truth of an image, of an *eikon*, and not the truth according to the criteria of modern history. Odysseus is not concerned with the truth as consistency, or as verisimilitude, but as *adequacy*.

There is one last notable detail in this passage: while Odysseus mourns his fellow soldiers who fell in combat and he is clearly a survivor of the Trojan War, his mourning is not that of the victim whose sufferings were inflicted on him by superior and unknown forces, but that of the actor who proudly recalls the acts in which he played the lead role. In later literary traditions, the story of Odysseus could also be updated many times as the memory of a traveller, explorer, and conqueror: the memory of a victor. Through, among others, the writings of Caesar on his Gallic Wars, Odysseus' epic undoubtedly inspired the conquering travellers of America in the sixteenth century, giving glorious meaning to the destruction of the aboriginal cultures of the West Indies.

Individual Memory and Collective Memory

Regardless of what is remembered, individual memory is an incessant neuronal or physiological process that constitutes an essential part of cognitive processes. What we call memory, mentally, but also bodily, making the past (i.e., what is no longer there) present, can manifest itself consciously or unconsciously (as in dreams). As we have seen, given the social condition of the human animal, these processes cannot be understood without social mediations of all kinds. If the song of the bard in the commented passage is essential to

perceiving a part of the ongoing present as past, this means that the past, as we know it or are moved by it, requires the songs and these rituals of commemoration or festive recitation insofar as a group, people, nation, etc., collectively agree on a particular image of that past. And perhaps that agreement is the effect of those rituals. Remembrance, memory, occurs in a scene with the narrative as an essential vehicle, which in turn involves not only a narrator but also those who listen to it. Odysseus will probably always be unable to discern what part of his memories he owes to his cognitive or neural memory and what part he owes to the song of the bard.

The mystery of memory – its content, the way it works, its timeliness, its relevance, its inevitability or necessity – is an ancestral concern of human beings that has undergone different forms of development in mythical, scientific, religious, and theoretical configurations, across different disciplines (including philosophy, psychology and history, intellectual history and literature, theology, rhetoric, and sociology, among others). It has even generated new methodological delimitations and strategies in the present, such as those linked to cultural memory studies. There is, in any case, a Greek or classical moment of memory, of which the Western cultural tradition remembers the mythical figures of Mnemosyne related to the timeless memory of the primordial or of the previous lives of the human soul. Plato and Aristotle considered memory of capital importance in relation to knowledge, to the veracity of images and traces, and in general, to what is true. The reflection on the relationship between topography and memory (in the famous story of the poet Simonides of Ceos, the legendary inventor of mnemonics) is also Greek in origin, and its rhetorical articulation in Cicero and Quintilian, Roman. Mnemonics related to topography, the idea of sites or places of memory or for memory, was a regular practice in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (and the colonial period in America), during which holy or sacred places multiplied, as well as places where relics were kept (such as the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia), religious pilgrimage routes (such as the Camino de Santiago in Europe), and miracles or apparitions that were remembered (such as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico). Mnemonic topography acquired a highly ideological charge in the hands of modern nation-states and their national identity politics. Every national state is recognizable by a network of patriotic monuments and “historical” places throughout its territory.

There was a moment of particularly intense interest in the functioning of memory between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a time that is related to the professionalization of the historian, and also to the works of Henri Bergson (particularly *Matter and Memory*; 1896), the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (*Untimely Meditations* of

1873–1876 and *On the Genealogy of Morals* of 1887) and Sigmund Freud (e.g., “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” of 1914 and “Mourning and Melancholia” of 1914–1916). As is known, from 1925 to 1950 Maurice Halbwachs (*The Collective Memory*) founded a new field of sociological research through the academic coinage of the concept of “Collective Memory”, which he developed based on certain writings of Emile Durkheim in relation to the collective unity that can be established by rituals and common symbols. Defining the concept of collective memory is difficult because it is used in different disciplines and the definitions vary significantly from one another. One of the first problems of collective memory as a concept is deciding where this social or collective memory resides and, secondly, by what resources it is formed. Halbwachs argued that not even the most personal memory can dispense with certain *social frameworks*, starting with language and continuing with the set of cultural references that constitute the medium in which individual memory finds its forms and supports in order to unfold. These seminal ideas were challenged almost immediately. Halbwachs’ contemporary Marc Bloch objected that the concept of collective memory was nothing more than a transposition from individual to collective psychology (“*Memoria colectiva*”).

Susan Sontag also discussed the problem of agency in collective memory. For Sontag, this concept would be ontologically impossible, as there cannot be a group that remembers what they have experienced in the way that an individual does. In other words, there is no neural basis for collective memory. A collective memory can only be the product of deliberate instruction, for example, by the (totalitarian) state. Collective memory, for Sontag, is another word for ideology (Sontag, “Regarding the Pain”). Yosef Yerushalmi, in turn, says that in a strict sense it cannot be admitted that a people can remember a past that they did not live. What a given community remembers is what has been transmitted to it in its present (Yerushalmi 18). However, the idea of the social frameworks of memory has become popular in recent years as an umbrella concept for a wide variety of disciplinary approaches ranging from psychology to history and cultural studies. Basically, and broadly speaking, today we recognize, as Halbwachs did, that even the most personal memory experiences are mediated by the social. Memory is always individual but is marked by the social and the common past of a group that is constructed and reconstructed in the present. For Ricœur, for example, it is possible to speak of collective memory because one does not remember in solitude but with the help of the memories of others. Our memories are often borrowed memories; they belong to the stories of others. Personal memories are part of collective stories that are, in turn, reinforced through public commemorations and celebrations (Ricœur, “*La lectura del tiempo*”).

pasado”). In addition, Jan Assmann has stressed the dependence of an idea of the past on the frame of references that constitute the present. According to Assmann, the past does not arise on its own but is the result of a cultural construction and reconstruction; it is always governed by specific motives, expectations, hopes and objectives and formed by the frame of references of a present (*Cultural Memory 2*).

Maurice Halbwachs did not conceive of collective memory as a synthesis between the various individual memories; he argued that the process should be considered exactly in reverse: it is on the basis of collective memories that individuals construct what they (illusorily) experience as individual memories. It is precisely what Halbwachs referred to as social frameworks of memory that make individual memory possible and condition it in the form of social pressures and influences of all kinds. Thus, it could be said that memory not only plays an obvious leading role in the constitution of individual or group identities but essentially in societal ties and in the formation of subjectivity. In this regard, speaking of collective memories means affirming the essentially social character of memory, but it also implies that both individual memories and cultural memory (as another, less controversial name for the concept of collective memories) are subject to or highly conditioned by the field of forces and political tensions of the present. The individual needs their memory to maintain their personal identity over time. However, collective memory, if it is not simply a psychological absurdity, is the result of mechanisms of transmission. The way in which a group preserves its identity is through a series of mnemonic products or gestures that are presumed to preserve certain fundamental identitarian signs. This consists, on the one hand, of maintaining in the memory of individuals a complex of knowledge associated with identity objectified in symbolic forms (myths, songs, rituals, sacred texts, routes, etc.), and on the other, of a series of practices, such as commemoration, contestation, repentance, and recognition.

In this regard, Ernst van Alphen argues that memory is produced as long as there are subjects who share a culture, as long as there are social agents who attempt to “materialise” these meanings of the past in various cultural products that become “vehicles of memory” and expressions that incorporate the past performatively (*Caught by History*).¹³ The function of this cultural mnemonic device is to guarantee group identity, or at least its continuity; its strategy is repetition and interpretation. Jan Assmann (*Cultural Memory*) differentiates

¹³ “Archives are no longer passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested or confirmed” (van Alphen, *Staging the Archive* 16).

between the different forms of collective memories; for example, *communicative memories* and *cultural memories*. The former occur during the time in which the protagonists of the period in question are still alive. Communicative memory is an active memory that the community of contemporaries shares and which for many members is a direct memory. According to Assmann, this period usually covers about 80 to 100 years and involves at least four generations. The forms of transmission are testimonial and informal. Within the framework of communicative memories, there is also a social memory, that is, social practices that involve unintentional, non-educational forms of transmission that nevertheless thematise the past in various ways and transmit it. According to Harald Welzer, “[f]our media of the social practice of forming the past can be distinguished: records, (moving) images, spaces, and direct interactions. Each refers to things which were not produced for the purpose of forming tradition, but which nonetheless transport history and shape the past in social contexts” (286).

The second, cultural memory, is the more or less institutionalised accumulation or storage where the documentary traces of the past are gathered or piled up, that is to say, the collection of documents preserved by a given community that no longer includes among its members people with direct memories from that past. The eventual transmission of cultural memories is generally in the hands of experts (heirs of the remote Greek *archon*) who keep the archive: priests, shamans, professors, and academics. The set of traces of the past is usually referred to as tradition. In general, tradition enjoys a general consensus, while communicative memories, sometimes called *hot memories*, are usually disputed memories. These traces of the past, however, are also the product of a selection, the product of what a community has deemed worthy of preserving. This documentary storage where information from the remote past is kept, in turn, contains both canon memory and archive memory. The first are the objects that the community or group (particularly its dominant social sectors) considers necessary to permanently update and transmit to new generations. The canon is what a community, particularly the national state, considers worthy of being transmitted and is usually part of formal education programs. The second type of memory, which we call the archive, consists of what is preserved but not actively communicated and is usually the subject of historiographic research. As Yerushalmi has written, using as a basis the vicissitudes of Jewish memory and his obligation to remember, this selection, which involves the canon and is usually configured as an official memory of the community, is not always the same: changes to the canon are made on rare occasions and in general by certain specific groups (often elites) who undertake a task of remembrance and rescue a certain past that they

consider important for the present of the community, for their identity as a group. If this rescue and transformation of the past is successful, it becomes part of the tradition. The process of remembrance cannot avoid changing that past: all remembrance involves changing its object (at least certain focal points in the inherited texts and images). Memory, like identity, is thus the result of an action; through the selection of memories and through a certain balance between memory and forgetting, individuals and groups turn arbitrary and fragmented experience into communicable stories about the past that at the same time condition the present existence and provide a basis for future action.

Heretical, Clandestine, or Prohibited Memories

One interesting concept in this respect is that of “clandestine” memories, or to use the name used by the Jewish Diaspora, “marrano memories”. Halbwachs himself refers to clandestine configurations of collective memory in early Christianity:

In the core of Christian collective memory there are as many collective memories, each of which claims to reproduce more faithfully than any other that which is their common object: the life and teachings of Christ. The Church has known many such conflicts since its beginning. In attenuated forms, the mystical schools reproduce ancient heresies or affiliate with recent heresies. (*On Collective Memory* 115)

But there are also clandestine memories in the case of the memory of the vanquished on the American continent after the European conquest, involving a temporality, a periodization, and causal and symbolic networks that are radically different from the one ultimately imposed by Western Europe, as explained by Nathan Wachtel in his well-known 1971 work *The Vision of the Vanquished*. Clandestine memories are related to counter-memories or memories that are a counterpoint to public memories or official memories upheld by institutions, national states, and the historiographic canon about the past.

Paul Ricœur defined the active exercise of memory as *remembrance* (*Memory, History, Forgetting*), a term related to what the Greeks called *anamnesis*. It is a conscious effort involving both will and intelligence. But a memory can emerge in a random and fragmentary way without the subject actively seeking it. Memory can take the form of an affliction suffered passively by the subject, that is, something that happens to them. This last form is referred to by Ricœur as *mneme*: memory that emerges to be received involuntarily (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, 14–15), or in Freudian terms, a *mnemic* image. In Marcel

Proust's experience, the forgotten, the lost past is something latent that can only be made intelligible as a result of chance sensations that activate a sensitive memory and appear to us in the form of images (Proust 28). Proust would call this last form of memory *involuntary memory*. Walter Benjamin explored the possibilities of this kind of memory and this kind of images as an opportunity to break with the inherited and canonized tradition of history ("history of the victors") and explore new connections between the present and the past allowing alternative forms of intelligibility and emancipation in the present (Tiedemann 936).

It is in this counter-hegemonic fissure where the memory cultivated by the Mothers during the dictatorship is situated.

Memory and Politics

Aleida Assmann identifies the need for a "political pedagogy" for the transmission of memory, which she understands as a sum of mediations:

Institutions and groups do not possess a memory like individuals do; there is, of course, no equivalent to the neurological system. Institutions and larger social groups, such as nations, governments, the church, or a firm do not "have" a memory—they "make" one for themselves with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments. Together with such a memory, these groups and institutions "construct" an identity. Such a memory is based on selection and exclusion, neatly separating useful from not useful, and relevant from irrelevant memories. Hence a collective memory is necessarily a mediated memory. It is backed up by material media, symbols, and practices which have to be grafted into the hearts and minds of individuals. The extent to which they take hold there depends on the efficiency of the political pedagogy on the one hand and the level of patriotic or ethnic fervor on the other. (55)

It is highly significant that Assmann mentions such "patriotic or ethnic fervor" as one of the pillars that could sustain a collective memory. It is difficult in current studies on cultural memory to imagine collective forms linked to memory that do not participate in one of the following four categories of community life: the business world, the religious sphere, the state, and the ethnic or national world. All of them suppose institutional structures of power (economic, state, or ecclesiastical) with a clear hierarchical bias and institutional devices for dissemination. None of them, however, can be applied to the group of people

involved in keeping alive the memory of the disappeared during the Argentine dictatorship. The relevance of this detail lies in the fact that the theoretical concepts linked to the study of collective memory phenomena are developed on these models or these alternatives, thus restricting the scope of such concepts.

One of the ways of understanding the chains of memory transmission, according to Aleida Assmann, is the passages from social memory to cultural memory. This distinction is motivated by the need to avoid the vagueness of the concept of collective memory.¹⁴ It indicates that there are various formats of memory that exceed the concept of collective memory. These expressions are divided into two large classes that in general terms describe social and interactive memory on the one hand, and political and cultural memory on the other. The first is based on lived experience that fades with its carriers, and the second refers to more durable carriers whose manifestations are external symbols and representations. The shift from a (social) memory that is intergenerationally embodied to a transgenerational (cultural) memory leads to processes of homogenization, specification, and institutionalization of long-term memory.

The passage from one to the other requires an organization that the author summarizes in five points: 1. the events must be organized in a narrative that is emotionally charged and mobilizing; 2. verbal and visual signs that serve as a memory aid; 3. institutions of learning and dissemination in the media; 4. sites and monuments presenting palpable relics; 5. commemorative rites that periodically reactivate memory and encourage collective participation. She adds:

Though grounded on external symbols, a collective memory can be re-embodied and transmitted from one generation to another. The cultural memory of a society is based on institutions such as libraries, museums, archives, monuments, institutions of education and the arts as well as ceremonies and commemorative dates and practices. While social forms of memory are short-lived because they depend on embodied and interactive communication, political and cultural formats of memory are designed for a long-term use to be transmitted across generations. (Whether they achieve this goal,

¹⁴ “The term collective memory, I would argue, is not necessarily a spurious notion, but it is much too vague to serve as a critical term. It is an umbrella term for different formats of memory that need to be further distinguished, such as family memory, interactive group memory, and social, political, national, and cultural memory” (A. Assmann 55).

is of course another matter, depending on the stability and continuity of the political infrastructure). (56)

It can be said that in Argentina all of these requirements are met, with some exceptions. Point 1 (narrative) is problematic not because of the absence of vigorous and emotional narratives, but because of the lack of a consensual narrative. The requirement under point 2 (verbal and visual signs) is widely met in Argentina, but the development and dissemination of these verbal and visual signs was the work of groups of Mothers and the artists who supported them. The few state interventions (before the Kirchner period) in this area were challenged or rejected. Regarding point 3 – institutions – groups that promote memory in Argentina have done a remarkable job of dissemination (until the Kirchner period, outside of the state media structure), in close partnership with social movements. The conditions mentioned in point 4 (monuments) were created in a long process that included the conversion of clandestine detention centres (CDCs) into museums. Those of point 5 (rites) are met in Argentina through the consecration of anniversaries that until 2002 were *unofficial*, as is the case of the marches of March 24, which every year commemorate the fateful day of the coup d'état with mass demonstrations supported and sustained by almost all of the social movements that raise demands in Argentina. Without these institutional and infrastructural supports, social memory could not endure, but Aleida Assman does not seem to contemplate the possibility that certain types of groups, not necessarily linked to state, religious or business institutions, persist over time because of an unresolved tension at the level of political antagonism, as is the case in Argentina.

Based on the above description, it could be concluded that the struggles for memory and for the transmission of these memories in Argentina had more to do with the way in which these struggles were linked to the political antagonisms of the country and civil society than with a kind of public or state policy firmly established in institutions. It is also necessary to underscore the fact that the movements for memory and justice, particularly the Mothers, have always had a universalist (human rights) approach and do not identify with any identitarian subculture. Those in Argentina who take up the cause of justice and truth have not necessarily had direct experiences with state repression in the past nor necessarily have relatives who have been victims of state terror. It is their present experience with the national state that leads them to insist on the obscure origin of present legislation and to seek its antecedents and expose them. This practice of memory is not based on identity dynamics or on a conflict between subcultures, but on a political conflict that implies the need to

profoundly rethink the relationship between the state and society. Each of its public manifestations in democracy was in itself a challenge to the political order (now democratic or post-dictatorial) that succeeded the dictatorship. It was through these challenges that a critical constellation has been built around the groups that defend human rights, which includes not only the testimonial activism of the victims of a regime, but also a series of intellectuals concerned with defining not only the historical dimensions of the damage but also the network of state and social complicities that made the past crimes possible. The struggle for the meanings of the recent past encouraged the exercise of “critical memory” and an inevitable questioning of the current institutional order, since post-dictatorial democracy could never completely free itself of the stigma of multiple forms of continuity between that recent past and the new democratic legality (Oberti and Pittaluga, “Memorias en montaje”).¹⁵

Memory and Temporality

At this time, there is not only a revival of interest in memory but also a paradigmatic shift particularly in the way Western Europe experiences temporality. According to historian Enzo Traverso, this sudden interest in memory cannot be understood without taking into account the political, social, and ideological turning point during the last decades of the twentieth century (*Left-Wing Melancholia* 56–57). Some concepts laid out by Reinhart Koselleck are useful in understanding the dimensions of this paradigm shift: “experience space” and “expectation horizon”, two historical categories. Koselleck explains that after the French Revolution, a profound change in our experience of time occurred that affected the balance that existed, according to Koselleck, between two dimensions of our historical experience: what he called the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” (255–275). Modernity upset this balance, giving rise to the acceleration of historical time and a new concept of revolution, that is, not as rotation but as radical innovation (Koselleck 43–57). The twenty-first century, on the other hand, inaugurated the era of another experience of time that French historian François Hartog referred to as “presentism”. Our century has naturalized a

¹⁵ “Se trataría (de la memoria crítica) de memorias que actúan para perturbar las estrategias instrumentalizadoras del pasado que sirven para mantener la dominación, para mantener el orden, estrategias que incluyen, como en todo proceso hegemónico, voces e historias opuestas. ... Formas de presentar el pasado, de articular el presente y lo sucedido que evitarían también que los ejercicios de memoria sean utilizados para desconocer las demandas políticas y sociales actuales, es decir, las deudas generadas hoy.” (“It [critical memory] would be about memories that act to disrupt the instrumentalizing strategies of the past that serve to maintain domination, to maintain order, strategies that include, as in any hegemonic process, opposing voices and stories. ... Ways of presenting the past, of articulating the present and what happened that would also prevent the exercises of remembrance from being used to disregard current political and social demands, that is, the debts generated today”; Oberti and Pittaluga, “Memorias en montaje” 45–46; translated by Marisela Trevin).

social structure that is experienced as immanent and immutable, in the framework of which historical time accelerates without affecting this structure at all. For Hartog, this is a new *regime of historicity*. Based on these approaches, Traverso maintains that the turn of the last century was characterised by a crisis of the utopian imagination. *Presentism* is a time suspended between a past that no longer passes and a future that can no longer be anticipated or predicted, except in the form of a catastrophe. This yields a diluted present that absorbs both the past and the future in such a way that “the dialectical tension between past and future is broken in a world withdrawn into the present” (Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia* 57). In this new frame of reference, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the idea of an end of history, stories about the past serve as warnings for the present, anti-totalitarian warnings that gradually become warnings about the political.

The dominant idea about the historical past that in some way inspires the current type of academic approach to memory is the feeling that the past, a past that has been overcome, was nothing more than a time of violence, genocide and totalitarianism, an overwhelming time that only produced countless victims. This way of seeing things is, in fact, related to the discovery of the victim as the great forgotten figure of the twentieth century. The victim (and the need for them to be named and remembered) becomes a focus of historical research and practices of memory as never before. But this figure is, above all, a figure of passivity, of infinite suffering. Emblematic examples are the victims of the Nazi genocide in European concentration camps and the experience of the survivors. They are people who were gathered together, classified, deported, displaced, and murdered exclusively because they belonged to a supposed *race*, not because of their ideas or practices. The indescribable crimes of Nazism and their replication in the crimes of Soviet Stalinism preceded and conditioned reflections on memory at the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. When the political link between the present and the past disappeared and memory as memory of the oppressed was depoliticized, the link between identity and memory returned to its old place of national memory; they were extended to ethnic memories or memories of minorities, memories that in the multicultural context of late capitalism, we could say, degenerated towards a situation of memories in competition. This competition can only take place when the demands to remember and commemorate the victims of past atrocities revolve exclusively around identity struggles. As Michael Rothberg saw it, this situation led to a struggle for the pre-eminence of certain memories in public space at the expense of others (2). A classic example in the United States, according to Rothberg, is the competition between the memory of slavery and the memories of the Holocaust (23). His proposal for

multidirectional memories in permanent negotiation, capable of articulating, for example, both the Holocaust and the history of slavery around a topic like the history of racism in the United States, is an attempt to re-politicize memory. If we understand politics in the way Rancière does, that is, as the conflict between the logic of domination (police-administration) and the radical democratic logic of equality, it will be necessary to conclude that historical and collective memory is political when it exercises a certain distance from the ideological obsession with identity. According to Rancière, political subjectivation is not constituted without a break with the previous *distribution of the sensible*, that is, the functions, the ways of saying, doing, and living of different social sectors in a given society (*Disagreement* ix–x).

In a society of *post-politics*, the immediate past is no longer perceived as a time of struggles between different societal projects, between different futures, a time of struggles and changes, but as a time of undifferentiated violence exclusively inhabited by perpetrators and victims. According to Rancière (“The Ethical Turn”), this climate of the time should be called “the ethical turn of politics”, in the sense of a community without conflict where politics and art are judged based on morality. What is somehow obliterated in this new ethical approach to the twentieth century is the agency of those who resisted or acted politically to transform the social conditions of existence. Agency in these new narratives is reserved almost exclusively for the executioners or perpetrators of these crimes (too often forgetting uprisings like that of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943 or strikes against the occupier, such as the strike of February 1942 in occupied Amsterdam). Current sensibility regarding the past (what is transmitted in educational spheres and favoured in academic research) is a type of work on memory focused on constant mourning for the victims, and what is transmitted to new generations is not the need “to change the world” but rather the duty to remember and honour them, along with the explicit or implicit warning that any political initiative that puts this hegemonic liberal-democratic present at risk may end in disaster. “Nowadays, the actors of the past need to achieve the status of victim in order to conquer a place in public memory” (Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia* 57). In this way, commemoration easily becomes an implicit celebration of the present. Germany in particular, and its specific relationship with its totalitarian past, was the central place from which this metamorphosis of historical consciousness, or in other words, this radical change in the regime of historicity, was able to take place. Undoubtedly among the motivations for this change was the experience of the end of socialist states and the planetary hegemony of an unbridled and triumphalist capitalism. This process was parallel to the breakdown of the old workers’ *socialities* built around an industrial fabric that in Europe was almost completely dismantled, and also parallel to the

crisis of the old social democratic or communist mass parties that were a driving force of the twentieth century, within the framework of which a memory of the left was successfully transmitted.

In Latin America, the military coups played this role of dismantling and reorganising the social fabric in neoliberal fashion. If we accept Traverso's interpretation, the new impetus of memory must be understood as a fundamental paradox, because while this shift from the social towards memory occurred in the 1990s, there was a simultaneous erasure, a forgetting, of old forms of subjectivity shaped by transformative practices. Very important twentieth-century traditions such as social militancy, workers' memory, and anti-fascism were thus obscured. This shift towards memory cannot be understood without the disappearance of the future, of utopia, and of the emancipatory change in contemporary considerations about the fate of today's society. In a world without collective projects, without utopias, one's gaze inevitably turns to the past. The abrupt abandonment of the "principle of hope", as the Frankfurt Marxist Ernst Bloch called utopian energies, determined the intellectual atmosphere of the European and North American twenty-first century, giving shape to a type of commemorative inquiry focused on history as a nightmare without any possible redemption, in the absence of any project other than that of reconciliation and consensus (*The Principle of Hope*). Our profoundly depoliticized age is characterised by a type of temporality where the public imagination, as explained by Frederic Jameson, finds it "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism", as continuously demonstrated by the popular genre of apocalyptic cinema ("Future City" 76). If memory is a matter of the present, the manufacture of a past according to the needs and concerns of the present, as asserted by Jan Assmann, then the present we inhabit will obviously tend to create a past of undifferentiated violence, where political oppositions are reduced to the difference between (liberal) democracy and totalitarianism. Thus, paradoxically, the terror of the past (conceived as an effect of political or ideological commitment) continues to serve as a warning; that is to say, in each commemoration, we are reminded of our fragility and the terrible consequences of rising up against the State. It is precisely this aspect that is of enormous relevance for the debates on memory in post-dictatorial Argentina.

Memory and Forgetting

In 1942 the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Nación* published a short story by Jorge Luis Borges that later became part of the famous 1944 collection *Ficciones*, namely "Funes el memorioso" (55–58; translated by Anthony Kerrigan as "Funes, the Memorious" 107–115).

Borges' story takes place in 1887 and is the "evocation" of a young peasant from Uruguay who, after an equestrian accident, is blessed with an absolute memory. Ireneo Funes was 19 years old and would die in one year. When Funes fell, he lost consciousness, but "when he recovered it, the present was almost intolerable it was so rich and bright; the same was true of the most ancient and most trivial memories" ("Funes, the Memorious" 112).¹⁶ Shortly afterwards, he realized that he was completely disabled. But this barely affected him. While before his accident Funes was almost incapable of reading, now a single reading of Pliny's *Naturalis historia* was enough for him to list, in Latin and Spanish, all of the cases of prodigious memories that were mentioned there, in Chapter 24 of the seventh book: "Cyrus, king of the Persians, who could call every soldier in his armies by name; Mithridates Eupator, who administered justice in the twenty-two languages of his empire; Simonides, inventor of mnemotechny; Metrodorus, who practiced the art of repeating faithfully what he heard once" (111).¹⁷ Tied to his bed, Funes the invalid "remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once" (112).¹⁸ He could reconstruct "all his dreams, all his fancies. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day" (112),¹⁹ although each reconstruction had in turn required a whole day. However, he was incapable of constructing abstract thoughts, and he was not interested in doing so either. The common human being needs definitions to find his bearings in the world; Funes just needed to remember.

Rumour had it that it was actually the weight of Funes' memory that destroyed his young life. This defence of forgetting raises the issue of memory as a selective machine, and its relationship with narrative, the canon, and the archive. Forgetting as a theme, as a necessity, and the uses and abuses of forgetting have been debated since ancient times, but here I will highlight the most influential modern examples. One of the most well-known is Friedrich Nietzsche's essential defence of forgetting in his *Untimely Meditations*.

¹⁶ "cuando la recobró, el presente era casi intolerable de tan rico y tan nítido, y también las memorias más antiguas y más triviales" ("Funes el memorioso" 55).

¹⁷ "Ciro, rey de los persas, que sabía llamar por su nombre a todos los soldados de sus ejércitos; Mitrídates Eupator, que administraba la justicia en los 22 idiomas de su imperio; Simónides, inventor de la mnemotecnia; Metrodoro, que profesaba el arte de repetir con fidelidad lo escuchado una sola vez" ("Funes el memorioso" 56).

¹⁸ "sabía las formas de las nubes australes del amanecer del 30 de abril de 1882, y podía compararlas en el recuerdo con las vetas de un libro en pasta española que solo había mirado una vez" ("Funes el memorioso" 57).

¹⁹ "todos los sueños, los entresueños. Dos o tres veces había reconstruido un día entero" ("Funes el memorioso" 58).

As if he were referring to the famous Borgean character, Nietzsche had written in his second *Untimely Meditation* of 1874: “Imagine the extremest possible example of a man who did not possess the power of forgetting[.] ... He would in the end hardly dare to raise his finger. Forgetting is essential to action of any kind, just as not only light but darkness too is essential for the life of everything organic” (“On the Uses and Disadvantages” 62). Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed in his *Untimely Meditations* that we suffer from an all-consuming historical fever, a living without being able to forget that destroys the vitality of a culture and precludes action, and he postulated the need to know how to forget voluntarily, in the same way that we also remember voluntarily. In this work, of which the central theme is the clarification of the relationship between life and history, Nietzsche asserts that the society of his time *suffers* from history. An excess of historicism sickens and damages life (67). History as a science has become separated from life, it has become an end in itself. The result is a confusing storage of information that is indigestible. Excess memory conspires against life.

For the German philosopher, memory is not related to remote mandates, but to the *presentness* of debt and pain in the body. Man is an animal that can keep promises. But these promises are experienced as guilt or debt, which in German are the same word: *Schuld*. What is at the origin of the feeling of guilt is, then, a feeling of debt, the idea that we owe something; but that feeling is also socially institutionalized in contractual relationships and ultimately sanctioned by penalties. A memory that is not antithetical to forgetting would allow it to be redirected to the future instead of to the past, making memory valuable to human life. He refers to this new conception of history that transforms past contingencies into future necessities as *counter-history* because it reverses the flow of time and finds necessity not in what was and is but in what may be in the future. Thus, the past is not something that must be accepted with resignation as a given, but that must be formed and transformed, interpreted and re-interpreted. This idea leads Nietzsche to assert that history at the service of life is an art and not a science, and that the impetus that shapes and transforms the past is artistic, not epistemological.

Nietzsche’s idea of the pedagogy of pain can be used to venture the hypothesis of an association between the cultivation of a victimizing memory with the extension of fear, that is to say, with an interest on the part of the state in reminding its citizens of the price that is paid for questioning the state’s monopoly on violence. Forgetting the stories of resistance against and defiance of the state, and remembering almost exclusively and in great detail the pain inflicted on the bodies of the victims of the state, not only inspires compassion and anguish; it also fills us with a feeling of helplessness and a certain sacred terror. Nietzsche’s intention is

not to proclaim what he calls “animal forgetfulness” – that form of “bliss” denied to human beings – as the formula for dealing with the past. The focus of Nietzsche’s criticism is the kind of historiographic practices of his time, particularly the claim to objectivity typified by the historian Leopold von Ranke. For Nietzsche, the theoretical-scientific ideal of the nineteenth-century historian, based on the criterion of objectivity, involves a certain passivity characteristic of an antiquarian. The antiquarian loves objects from the past and would like them to remain unchanged. Forgetting is not a force that inhibits memory but one that is actively involved in the evolution of memory. Memory is not opposed to animal forgetfulness but rather participates in that forgetfulness. When memory is radically opposed to forgetting, it can generate a past that undermines the future of life.

However, when memory is involved in forgetting, it establishes a relationship with the past that enriches life. The history that Nietzsche criticises is one that assumes a timeless point of view and attempts to judge the past with unalterable criteria according to an idea of consciousness as absolute and always equal to itself. Thus, Nietzsche opposes history as the preservation and veneration practised by an *antiquarian* and proposes as an alternative not so much forgetfulness but a fluid relationship with the past that constitutes a critical memory and is at the service of life. This formulation by Nietzsche can be interpreted as echoing Karl Marx’s well-known passage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (595)

Remembrance and forms of identification with discourses and behaviours of the past were used by the bourgeois revolutions to legitimize an unprecedented transformation. For example, the leaders of the French Revolution reappropriated the vocabulary of the Roman Republic, thus disguising the historical novelty of the revolution. These acts of historical masking or camouflage were also recognised by Halbwachs:

In this way the new structure was elaborated in the shadow of the old. We might say that the new ideas became salient only after having for a long time behaved as if they were the old ones. It is upon a foundation of remembrances that contemporary institutions were constructed. For many of them it was not enough to demonstrate that

they were useful to make them acceptable. They were forced to fade into the background, so to speak, in order to make apparent the traditions behind them which they aspired to replace and with which they tried in the meantime to fuse. (“On Collective Memory” 125–126)

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx posits that “[t]he social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself, before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past” (597). In this sense, memory is viewed as a reactionary devotion that makes the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness and a new subjectivity in line with the purposes of the emancipation of labour impossible. Great memories are nothing more than the presence (the present) of the past as a rite and as a limit to the emancipating powers of the present, and for this reason, Marx believed it necessary to subject them to criticism in order to distance oneself from them.

This radical stance against memory was due to the idea that the future communist revolution needed to invent its own language if it wished to avoid the distortion of its substance. But in relation to the Paris Commune in 1871, Marx himself ventured the possibility of a revolutionary tradition, that is to say, a memory that belongs entirely to the labour movement, that would remember and honour its leaders or martyrs. This is the starting point of other frameworks, completely different from national traditions, for a memory of history that leaves numerous symbols, works of art, significant materialities, and places of collective memory, that is to say, what we may call workers’ memory.

One of the themes that is often associated with the uses or abuses of memory is what is referred to as official national history. During the consolidation of nation-states in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the educational structure of the state was conceived as a way of creating national citizens and, for this purpose, it deployed what would be referred to today as “politics of memory”. Each country had its national history, an account of the nation’s past that promoted feelings of patriotic loyalty. This is particularly true in Latin American nations born in the early nineteenth century out of the contingencies of their struggles for independence, as fragments of the old Spanish colonial empire. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, the new independent nations did not constitute fully justified nations, according to the ideas of the time (in general, romantic ideas about the people and the national genius, language, and identitarian legends). The national states made great efforts towards cultural uniformity, especially through the teaching of history in general

primary and secondary school education. This history was obviously national history, a kind of official history of the nation. It was a story based primarily on a romantic narrative that idealized the “heroes” or “forefathers” of independence and the first civil wars. The extent to which these national histories were at the same time sustained by a series of monuments, tributes, and places of memory can still be recognized today in the urban landscape of Buenos Aires. These monuments consecrate a unique version of national history and are intended to be timeless, as shown by the profuse use of marble and stone in commemorative monuments and bronze in equestrian statues. The construction of this story was the work of professional historians and designers of teaching materials whose success in shaping a certain national tradition depended largely on the political forces at play and the specific composition of the ruling elites, their economic interests, and their political projects.

Pierre Nora has done a formidable job of compiling information on the sites of national memory in France, based on Halbwachs’ ideas on the construction of collective memory.²⁰ To him we owe a series of considerations regarding the differences between history and memory. For Nora, history must conform to the facts, while memory always includes emotional, identitarian, or political aspects that are not based on documentary veracity. National memory is an obviously selective narrative, in which a fabric of collective memories related in the style of romantic literature is coupled with a fabric of forgetfulness that is no less dense. It is this “necessary” forgetfulness that sustains the coherence of the official narrative and perhaps the ideological consistency of the nation as a distinguishable and recognisable community, at least for its inhabitants. The contemporary insistence on the essentially narrative character of historiographic discourse has contributed to a great extent to the loss of credibility of these national narratives conceived as an “objective” historiographic contribution to national culture.

In Ernst Renan’s famous defence of forgetting in his 1882 lecture entitled “What is a Nation?” the French intellectual justifies these efforts on the part of the state because he denies that nations are based on ethnic backgrounds and verifiable historical origins. In his view, nations are voluntary constructs supported by a mixture of populations. The awareness of a common past is an indispensable element for the constitution of nations, but its survival depends on a selective memory. In order to maintain national cohesion, certain disruptive aspects in the events of the past must be excluded from memory; “all its individuals must

²⁰ *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire*. The texts by Pierre Nora that make up this book were published in French in the collective work, under the direction of Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*.

have many things in common, but must also have forgotten many things” (Renan 137). This well-known lecture is useful for understanding how the agents of memory and particularly the nation-state do not implement politics of forgetting or politics of memory, but rather act to establish a particular *articulation* between the two in order to sustain what Benedict Anderson has called an “imagined community” (6–7).

In the twentieth century, Freud also reclaimed the value of forgetting, but as an inevitable constituent dimension of psychic life. Psychoanalytic theory does not consider forgetting as a failure, or a loss, but as the result of operations of censorship and repression that govern or structure the critical balance between conscious life and the abysses of the unconscious (“Psychopathology”).

For Paul Ricœur, forgetting is a “disturbing threat” and what allows its abuse is the inevitable narrative configuration that every attempt to transmit the past acquires (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 412). Thus, the manipulation of memory is based on the means of variation offered by the work of narrative configuration: “The strategies of forgetting are directly grafted upon this work of configuration: one can always recount differently, by eliminating, by shifting the emphasis, by recasting the protagonists of the action in a different light along with the outlines of the action” (448).

Memory is the selection and narration of events, which therefore presupposes a specific social organisation of memory. What influences this selection in the first place is forgetting. It is obvious that between what happened and what is remembered, between what happened and what is forgotten, there is a very complex network of mediations that includes interests, narratives, politics, and emotions, in addition to chance, which makes memory a problematic matter by definition. Every memory or every image that comes to mind is associated with something that is forgotten or overshadowed. Forgetting follows memory like its shadow. Ricœur distinguishes between two important figures of profound forgetting. One of them is forgetting due to destruction of traces. This destruction may be voluntary or involuntary and is organized into three types: documentary, cortical, and affective. This division into three types of destruction is organized by Ricœur based on three types of mark or footprint. One of these marks is the document as a fingerprint. This can be destroyed by ideological interests or power interests. Archives are the defence we have against this type of destruction. Another is the cortical or neuronal imprint (its destruction is then related to brain dysfunction). The third is the affective mark, the image of something or someone that survives in our memory, a memory that can remain unavailable for a long time but that returns at the (almost miraculous) moment of recognition. In this last case, oblivion occurs as

a form of profound forgetting. It is what Ricœur called a forgetting held in reserve. It is forgetting as an obstructed memory or as a manipulated memory (412–415). Political repression in Argentina was intended to ensure oblivion through the destruction of documents and the manipulation of memory. To this, the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo opposed their own testimony and the construction of a counter-archive.

Memory and Archive

The archive is the place that contains rigid data, dead or resolved things that have lost the impetus of contingency and, thus, the knowledge it produces always has a funereal air. Archives preserve not so much the events of the past as they have occurred, but rather the interested forms of their recovery and the nature of their retrieval. For this reason, it can be assumed that the archive, in addition to performing its function of preservation, creates the event, produces it. Founding an archive is above all an act of tracing, selection, and registration, in which social memory is guarded and organised in paradigmatic relationships that regulate the way in which the past can be transmitted. The documentary relevance of what will remain is decided in the archive, but these decisions can never be separated from the way in which this documentary storage is organised, that is to say, what is kept is registered in a specific place, a category, placing it in a syntactic relationship with other objects, creating significant series.

The idea that the archive not only organizes but constitutes our knowledge is an idea that Michel Foucault developed in his 1969 book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The archive is, first of all, the place that makes certain statements possible and inhibits others. Thus, all critical work must begin as the critique of the archive. Photography as a document, for example, emerges in the act of photographing, which already involves the power to crop, a design of reality, a staging, but the archive reserves for itself the power to classify photographic material, incorporating documents and rejecting others, according to arbitrary criteria. What we find in the photographic archive is what has survived a double cropping or a double filter (the capture of the image and its archiving) inspired by different interests. This involves more than an arbitrary selection: it involves a regime of appearance.

In the personal identification systems of the modern state and the series of institutions of which it is composed, what is recorded in its archives is not our personal sense of identity, but rather an objective or reified identity, created in connection with a series of specific characteristics, such as a profession, a marital status, educational or medical data, and even racial or ethnic characteristics that in a certain sense take the form of a certain fate. On the

one hand, the subject is interpellated according to that manufactured identity and, on the other hand, those who do not appear in those records do not exist. Today, the mechanisms of identification of state archives are established on the basis of biometric data with respect to which we cannot exert individual will or practice any distancing. They are procedures of identification and recognition inscribed in the body and even in our genetic code, and they reduce us, as Giorgio Agamben has tirelessly repeated, to *bare life*, where there is no room for personal or collective ethics (*Nudities* 51–52). The passion for identification of modern archives, which promotes a surveillance technology that is in constant development, has led to what is known as *big data*, built on the basis of computer platforms capable of storing innumerable personal data. The algorithm aims to group users together in “echo chambers”, allowing them to know their preferences and habits of consumption and thus to create complete psychological profiles which are trafficked. This is referred to as the *performative* character of the archive (van Alphen, *Staging the Archive* 16), because the funereal aspect of the modern archive does not prevent it from being a dynamic device. The archive is supposed to preserve (or save) the events of the past, or personal data, but its primary utility is prospective; its authentic purpose is the future, because the identifying archive is a machine that converts the future into something calculable.

What we have of the past is always remains, fragments, and their meaning is always problematic. Cultural memory is often spoken of as an inheritance, a kind of buried treasure that one must unearth to find. But as Hannah Arendt pointed out in *Between Past and Future*, citing a well-known text by the poet René Char, “[o]ur inheritance was left to us by no testament” (3). What is meant by this is that the buried treasure of the past that was left to us has no legal heirs; it is subject to a political dispute and it is in danger. This is an idea that Walter Benjamin had defended in several of his texts, particularly in “On the Concept of History”, when he refers to a tradition threatened by its barbaric transmission. “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”, Benjamin argues, suggesting that memory is governed by the victors (392). Georges Didi-Huberman asserts that we not only inherit memories but also inherit what is forgotten, and wonders, for example, how does one inherit the courage of others? Referring to the fate of the memories of the Warsaw ghetto (*Desear desobedecer* 315–330), Didi-Huberman’s question could be reformulated as follows: to which archive does the Warsaw Ghetto insurrection belong? What archive can account for those acts? Could there be a relationship, a link between the archive and the revolt to the extent that it can be said that the primary purpose of the state archive is to prevent it?

Applied to the archives, the principle of revolt always involves a categorical disruption. A paradigmatic case of a close, political link between revolt and archive is the Ringelblum Archive, the archive of resistance of the ghetto that operated from 1939 to 1943. The Nazi government was a formidable archiver, as shown by the meticulous documentation carried out in the camps (van Alphen, “Monument for Future Memory” 5). It was the criteria of selection, delimitation, registration and administrative discrimination that guaranteed the effectiveness of Nazi extermination. The ghetto inhabitants who were organised in the Bund, the socialist Jewish organisation, and the left-wing Zionists (like Ringelblum himself) knew very well that annihilation awaited them, but they also knew that the Nazi government would administer the future memory of Polish Jews. There was even a plan for a “Central Museum of Extinct Races in Germany” (“Monument for Future Memory” 3). Faced with the Nazi archive of “extinction” and its future museum, the archiving team of Oyneg Shabes (in Hebrew, those who celebrate the Sabbath), formed within the ghetto around historian and anthropologist Emanuel Ringelblum, made the political decision to dispute that future memory by collecting and hiding everything that could be gathered about the lives of the ghetto inhabitants. While the act of archiving means *setting apart* what is relevant, separating it from what is not, the underground archive of the ghetto was aimed at recording everything: life diaries, chronicles of starvation, poems, stories and children’s drawings, personal belongings, provisions established by authorities, resistance diaries, photos, maps of the camps, theatre posters, mementos and testimonies, farewell letters, calls to arms, statistics, and testaments. It is a storage archive, a horizontal, underground, exuberant collection, lacking hierarchies and fixations, and can only be described by the Borgean strategy of chaotic enumeration.²¹ These materials were buried before the ghetto uprising and partially recovered after the war. The decision to build this archive was purely political: it involved a break with the strategy of appeasement and negotiation of the *Judenräte*, or Jewish Councils, whose policy was to act as intermediaries for the Nazi government. It involved the acceptance of illegality as the only autonomous area of action: a break with the illusions cultivated by many in the ghetto, who sought to prolong their lives by obeying the authorities. It involved setting in motion “a politics of truth”, and a truth that can only be an underground truth (Didi-Huberman, *Eparses* 71–79). It also involved building the archive on the basis of

²¹ For Ernst van Alphen, the model of Ringelblum’s archive, whether willingly or not, is that of the “classical archive”, which reconstructs a life, not the modern archive, which creates reified identities. See van Alphen, “Monument for Future Memory”.

collective and complicit work linked to illegal mutual aid organisations (underground schools, soup kitchens, medical assistance, etc.) inside the ghetto.

The principles of the modern archive are capturing, fixation, and uniformity. Police archives show marks that power has inflicted on wretched or “infamous” lives, marks on the fragile human body, that is to say, lives which are only brought to our knowledge because they had the misfortune of having come into contact with the state (Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men”). A good example of this type of archive is the secret archives of state terror, which are carried out by political and social repressive apparatuses in an illegal or semi-legal manner, often using parallel structures, such as *death squads*. These are archives that facilitate the organization and effectiveness of illegal repression. They could be conceptualised as *unspeakable archives*, a special variant of the modern archive and the police archive.

There are two key examples that shed light on the modes of operation of state terror: one is the National Police Archives of Guatemala, which were discovered by a combination of chance and ineptitude. An explosion in December 2005 in the munitions depot of the police institution where they were kept (or concealed) revealed 75 to 80 million pages of police files on almost a century of abuses, especially the systematic and naturalised racism of the State in Guatemala, but also on the dirty war and annihilation of the 1980s and 1990s: arbitrary detentions, secret executions, disappearances, and systematic torture.²² The other example is the archive that was also found by chance in 1992 in Paraguay, documenting the fate of hundreds and perhaps thousands of victims of Operation Condor in the Southern Cone.

In Argentina, however, the fate of this kind of unspeakable archive is still unknown to us. In this case, one would have to speak of an *absent archive*, since there is only extremely fragmentary knowledge of it today and the Argentine state has been unwilling or unable to obligate the armed forces to provide this vital information about their operations.²³ Research

²² Kirsten Weld, citing Gloria Alberti, refers to these as “archives of terror”, contrary, and at the same time complementary, to the “archive of pain”, which involves documents and testimonies collected by relatives, human rights organisations and other non-state actors (4).

²³ One of the cases that testify to the existence of these hidden files is the photos of disappeared detainees that the graphic worker Víctor Bastera managed to steal from the ESMA (the Navy Mechanics School – current Museum of Memory – and one of the largest clandestine detention centres in Buenos Aires, located in the Federal Capital). Bastera was detained at that centre between 1979 and 1983 and he was in charge of taking passport photos of the repressors. Starting in 1980, Bastera began to hide some of the photos in his underwear and photosensitive paper envelopes (envelopes with the negatives whose opening implied the veiling of the

on state terror in Argentina continues to depend on the documentary contributions of human rights organizations, the families of the victims and survivors, their oral testimonies, and the remains found in mass graves. Any consideration of the theme of the archive in Argentina, according to Pittaluga, must begin with this observation, that of the *absent archive* (“Democratización del archivo”).²⁴ These archives were intended to remain hidden, destroyed, or buried. It is remarkable that these archives of terror were, in a way, also underground archives, even though they were organised by the State, and that they were intended to be concealed, just as the Ringelblum Archive was buried in the ghetto area. But the Ringelblum Archive was buried to save it from destruction, to save the life testimonies and the historical denunciation of thousands of people who knew their death awaited them. *It was buried in order to be found*. The underground archive formed by Ringelblum and his group gathered from the ghetto multiple forms of experience, even the most anodyne, anything that would serve to rebuild a life. Van Alphen thus explains the initiative of Ringelblum and his people as a battle for memory, fought in advance – a battle against the Nazis’ handling of that past.

Didi-Huberman, for his part, points out that this battle continues today. There is no consensus on the memories of the ghetto. The right wing of Israeli Zionism claims them as part of the eternity of the Jewish nation. But for some survivors and former leaders of the uprising, such as Marek Edelman, the legacy of the ghetto is not the glory of the State of Israel but a social struggle in which evil is not Nazi, but human, and a legacy that tells us how to recognise that evil wherever it emerges, in every situation of oppression. Thus the legacy of the ghetto uprising is not the State of Israel; it belongs to all those who fight against unjust power. Here we have the same experience and memories that are diametrically opposed to each other, or a politically contradictory legacy.

In Argentina, this *storage* archive, which confronts the biopolitical strategies of the power that disappeared those who resisted, is the archive of the Mothers and Grandmothers

photos). Since 2007, the images have belonged to the exhibition “Faces taken from ESMA”. They were shown for the first time in the Museum of Art and Memory of the city of La Plata.

²⁴ “Pensar el tema de los archivos en Argentina implica inmediatamente reflexionar sobre su escasez, sobre la falta de repositorios públicos, de tal manera que quien quisiera escribir una “historia del archivo” tendría que ceñirse a una historia de su ausencia, de su liquidación, su emigración o su privatización. O, dicho de otro modo, una historia de las formas de desplazamiento, del desplazamiento del archivo como uno de los fundamentos de la vida cultural de nuestro país.” (“Thinking about the issue of archives in Argentina immediately implies reflecting on their scarcity, on the lack of public repositories, in such a way that whoever wanted to write a “history of the archive” would have to stick to a history of their absence, of its liquidation, its emigration or its privatization. Or, in other words, a history of the forms of displacement, of the shift of the archive as one of the foundations of the cultural life of our country”; Pittaluga, “Democratización del archivo”).

of the Plaza de Mayo, which was a response to the archival act of the dictatorship. It could be said, according to Didi-Huberman's reasoning, that the Mothers, a group that never intended to seize power, either voluntarily or involuntarily, exerted certain *unpower*, which is a kind of *potency*. This ability led them over the years to spearhead the general resistance against the dictatorship. Part of this potency (which implies political inventiveness) was the slow construction of an archive. It is an archive that, like Ringelblum's, was a response to that X, to that hole in the state archive, an "other" archive, to the extent that the family and personal histories of the victims and even art aimed at evoking the disappearance were added to the inventories of legal data of the disappeared. Both of these archives can be described as counter-archives, or better yet, archives *in revolt*. Although both make an inventory of the destruction on the ground, Emanuel Ringelblum's *Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto* and Rodolfo Walsh's "Carta abierta de un escritor a la Junta Militar" ("Open Letter from a Writer to the Military Junta")²⁵ in Argentina are identical political acts in that they attempt to break through the walls, addressing the future, announcing a possible justice, and a kind of hope *that was no longer for them*.

²⁵ "Open Letter from a Writer to the Military Junta" is the last work of writer and journalist Rodolfo Walsh. It was written in March 1977, one year after the military coup. It is a detailed analysis of the situation and a forceful denunciation of the government's actions. Walsh managed to make numerous copies of it and mailed them to various media outlets abroad. Gabriel García Márquez described the text as a "masterpiece of journalism". Hours after writing the letter, Walsh was kidnapped and killed.