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The unruly image: memory and transmission in Argentina.

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PART 2: TOWARDS THREE CONFIGURATIONS OF MEMORY

Introduction to Part 2

His black eyes, full of fire and shadowed by bushy eyebrows, caused an involuntary sensation of terror; because Facundo never looked straight ahead, and out of habit, out of art, out of the desire to always make himself fearsome, he usually had his head bowed and looked between his eyebrows, like the Ali-Pasha of Monvoisin. (Domingo Faustino Sarmiento 81; my trans.)⁷⁹



Fig. 1. Daniel Santoro. *Civilización y Barbarie*. 2006,

<http://www.danielsantoro.com.ar/obra.php?anio=13&obsel=2653>. Accessed May 19, 2019.

⁷⁹ “Sus ojos negros, llenos de fuego y sombreados por pobladas cejas, causaban una sensación involuntaria de terror; porque Facundo no miraba nunca de frente, y por hábito, por arte, por deseo de hacerse siempre temible, tenía de ordinario la cabeza inclinada y miraba por entre las cejas, como el Alí-Bajá de Monvoisin” (Sarmiento 81).

Education and Barbarism

The national schooled history, which emphasizes, among other things, the places and dates of national memory, was perhaps the first experience with a state-sponsored pedagogy of memory. In Argentina, this memory narrating the origins of the nation was built upon colonial presuppositions. The genocidal practices against the indigenous population in the nineteenth century at the dawn of the republic were largely silenced. The modalities of this partial concealment, and sometimes legitimization, can be easily traced in the school representations (images) alluding to the gestation of the modern Argentine state. The idea of native peoples as destructive and savage hordes was also artistically endorsed in the literary and pictorial theme of the *malón* and *la cautiva* in the nineteenth century.

The construction of a modern Latin American identity was marked by colonial and peripheral conditions regarding the global distribution of power in the world, that is, by a condition of political-economic subordination to central countries (Calveiro, “Golpes de Estado”). Coloniality is a sustained process and did not cease in the nineteenth century with the wars of independence. The practices of dispossession and extractivism by central countries in the Latin American region continue to persist. A “just memory”, in the sense given by Paul Ricoeur to this concept,⁸⁰ should note that discriminatory, exclusionary, and homicidal practices against indigenous peoples are not solely matters of the past. Current examples of concentration of land ownership at the expense of the native population have resulted in new disappearances and killings, such as the emblematic cases of Rafael Nahuel and Santiago Maldonado during the government of Mauricio Macri in recent years.

There exists a natural alliance between memory and art against these official narratives that systematically fuelled collective memory with oligarchic myths. To the strategic fiction described by historians, art and memory oppose their “own truth, woven from what the witnesses know and what they don’t know, the conscious action of individuals and the unconscious law that binds them” (Rancière, *Politics of Literature* 74).

Diana Lenton warns of a common regime of legibility, which could include crimes of military dictatorships, indigenous massacres, and disappearances in democracy. Common here does not mean continuity but sharing a pattern that places systematic extermination operations on structures of economic oppression ready to be reactivated whenever their

⁸⁰ “It is along the path of critical history that memory encounters the sense of justice” (Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* 500).

stability is threatened. This regime of legibility also allows linking anti-colonial struggles with current struggles of social movements in a common code of resistance.⁸¹

The question of the recent past is, among many other things, a question about the forms that social exclusion processes took in Argentina. If there is a figure or *grand narrative* that has preceded exclusion policies with singular persistence, it is embodied in the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism. The image that inaugurates this section evokes the origin and persistence of a national myth. In 1845, Sarmiento wrote from his exile in Chile *Facundo or Civilization and Barbarism in the Argentine Pampas*. It was the brilliant creation of a formula around which various discourses of “progress” and modernization were organized. According to Maristella Svampa,

Facundo is the description of a country, the literary-social portrait of a leader and his roots, a work written under bullets; a text that promises a leading company but already slips in an ideology of social domination; a book that expresses the theoretical assumptions that will guide the construction of the Argentine State, and that at the same time that promises the path of integration, establishes a principle of exclusion. (*El dilema argentino* 383)⁸²

This principle, as is known, envisions a European and urban modernity that could only develop by excluding a large part of rural Argentina’s population (individuals, their beliefs, and their ways of life). Sarmiento’s work identified both the Spanish colonial heritage and the indigenous population, especially the groups called “castas” during colonial times (gauchos, indigenous peoples, descendants of slaves, etc.), as agents of backwardness. *Facundo* was written amid the civil war between Unitarians and Federalists. For Sarmiento, provincial caudillos represented the Asiatic despotism of pastoral cultures. These caudillos

⁸¹ According to Lenton, “we must confront the task of emphasizing that within the physical and social space framing the Argentine nation-state today, there are human groups that are not merely ‘descendants’ of those who survived the genocidal practices of the late 19th century, but are simultaneously themselves victims of a past-present that persists in more or less subtle practices, which nonetheless remain genocidal. This is one of the elements that configures them, both those of today and those of yesterday, as part of a ‘community of victims’ that, to some extent, shapes their subjectivity today as political subjects—Argentinian citizens, yes, but citizens/victims/descendants. Similarly, they are participants in an economic exploitation relationship—exploited/victims/descendants” (16).

⁸² “Facundo es la descripción de un país, el retrato literario-social de un caudillo y sus raíces, una obra escrita bajo las balas; un texto que promete una empresa dirigente pero que desliza ya una ideología de dominación social; un libro que expresa los supuestos teóricos que guiarán la construcción del Estado argentino, y que al mismo tiempo que promete la vía de la integración, establece un principio de exclusión” (M. Svampa, *El dilema argentino* 383).

(like Facundo Quiroga) personified barbarism. They were supposedly brutal leaders of rural castes, beings who could not control their passions, closer to nature than to culture. The formula split reason and passion, culture and nature, light and darkness, embodied in a social distribution. The antinomy between civilization and barbarism is evidently a false dichotomy or even a “hoax”, in Svampa’s words (*El dilema argentino* 371). It is something that has been demonstrated many times. But this hoax is not innocent: it has been used every time “the plebeian” breaks into the public space (404). The book was born as a brilliant pamphlet against the ruling caudillo, Juan Manuel de Rosas, and to defeat rural caudillos. Later, it became the foundation for social engineering operations carried out on indigenous peoples and the lower classes: enculturation, integration, extermination, or subalternization. Much later, in the mid-twentieth century, similar exclusion and disciplining techniques were exercised against the so-called “descamisados” or “cabecitas negras”: rural immigrants who arrived in the capital during the 1940s and 1950s in search of work and who had largely embraced Peronism.

According to Svampa, the dichotomy “Civilization or Barbarism” is not an inherent structure of the Argentine ideo-political system (*El dilema argentino* 371). It is neither an explanatory category in itself nor a “structural totality”. Instead, it has served as a principle of political legitimation, a political invective, a social representation (inconsistency of the social), and a global conception of history (373). However, Sarmiento’s image has always functioned as a key that, rather than facilitating, obstructs the possibility of thinking about the real divisions in the country. Its reactivation in the political field has always had the advantage, over the democratic conception, of connecting the political present to a framework of political and historical intelligibility.

The dictatorship had relied on the National Security Doctrine, focused on the “subversive” and communist threat. In the post-dictatorship period of the 1990s, a dual surveillance system emerged: one that subjected the poor to special supervision and another, milder one for the “citizen” of the middle class. By the late 1990s and with the upheaval of 2001, there was a revival of the old Sarmientine image. A new subject of social protest emerged: the *piqueteros* (unemployed workers) and territorial movements that now embodied the figure of the dangerous classes. The image of danger concentrated on the mobilized poor classes. Even today, when right-wing politicians address “la gente de bien” – that is, “people of good standing” (distinguishing them from others whose very existence appears criminal) – they are invoking the old oligarchic and liberal myth that divides the country between agents of progress and uncultured and even visceral forces.

However, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento – a figure loaded with ambiguity – not only wrote the most important literary work of the nineteenth century in Argentina but also, during the same process of nation-state foundation, initiated the Argentine public universal and free education system. The creator of the grand image of exclusion is simultaneously the founder of an extensive system of inclusion. The classic dichotomous image was also articulated around two principles: one of exclusion and the other of integration. The principle of exclusion justified the elimination of the native population and the second justified the socioeconomic system and the triumph of the oligarchic civilizing project (also aimed at acculturating immigrants).⁸³ Throughout national history, this famous dichotomy has been redefined many times, always in a tense relationship between the political and intellectual fields. Ultimately, it was the social scene that, at different historical moments, defined or managed the fluctuations between both fields (Svampa, *El dilema argentino* 369).

In the same year that marked the thirtieth anniversary of the last dictatorship, the visual artist Daniel Santoro drew with charcoal on a 170- by 130-centimeter paper his own interpretation of “Civilization and Barbarism”. In this drawing, the nuances of colours given by charcoal reveal a standpoint: sepia for the background of a threatening forest surrounding the headquarters building of “human reason”, black for the panther (barbarism), and white for the girl in a school apron (civilization). However, the elements of this composition are not purely oppositional based on colour; they are also complementary based on the arrangement of bodies. Civilization rests here on barbarism. Barbarism is the animal, embodied in a panther that does not sleep, receiving the girl on its back and embracing her with its tail. Civilization is represented as a combination of dream, childhood, and school; it is a schoolgirl: childhood and femininity as a symbol of fragility sleeping its innocent sleep on the panther. The girl wears a public school apron and is suggested to belong to a working-class family. Santoro raised a suspicion about the old Sarmiento formula whose poles seem to become porous. His image draws from the sentimental Peronist imaginary of resistance. Note that the girl wears a mourning armband for the death of Eva Perón (on July 26, 1952). It

⁸³ According to Adriana Puiggrós, “[e]l antagonismo entre ‘bárbaros y civilizados’ no fue ajeno sino que formó parte de la trama de un sistema, que al mismo tiempo fue uno de los más igualitarios de su época. Sarmiento no inventó el antagonismo; conceptualizó de manera genial la matriz de los vínculos entre los argentinos. Mientras continuaba como Presidente de la Nación el genocidio en el Paraguay, Sarmiento consolidaba el sistema de “educación común destinado a todos los argentinos, que llevaba dentro su propia negación.” (“The antagonism between ‘barbarians and civilized’ was not incidental but was part of the plot of a system that, at the same time, was one of the most egalitarian of its time. Sarmiento did not invent the antagonism; he ingeniously conceptualized the matrix of relationships among Argentinians. While the genocide in Paraguay continued under his presidency, Sarmiento was consolidating the system of ‘common education for all Argentinians,’ which carried within itself its own negation”; 341).

transports us to a time of nostalgia and idealized recreation of the early Peronist governments. Santoro recovers or re-imagines an era that knew how to invent the idealistic reading of civilization and barbarism, where the poles reconcile, and antagonisms are not so evident. The work represents an example of a transformation of the meaning and references of this image. In his canvas, the energies of the wild, the animal, and the barbaric do not oppose culture. Rather, a sacred alliance seems to have been woven between the school and the desert, between the people and the jungle. While in other regions the references of this image have remained unchanged, in the Argentine case, there is an alteration in which the poles of the dichotomy are reversed; it is a “conversion of barbarism into the positive national core, the true place of Civilization, against a false liberal civilization” (Svampa, *El dilema argentino* 369).

The way of imagining civilization, that is, imagining Argentine modernity offered by *Facundo* (with its idealized vision of colonial powers), acquired significant symbolic value in schools and remained stable and continuous over time. Santoro created the painting “Civilization and Barbarism” in 2006: it is the post-dictatorship era; Néstor Kirchner is governing the country. It is a time of revisionism and pedagogy of memory. Argentina in 2006 reflects the weakening of the poles of the image. However, this traditional figure that represented good and evil for so many years still retains powerful symbolic efficacy as a social representation linked to the new dangerous classes. The emergence of the invisible and displaced, a constant in the Argentine scene, tends to be read in a Sarmientine key. Santoro’s painting expressed the desire to overcome this dichotomy, an overcoming conceived from public, universal, and free school education.

Revisiting the dictatorial past leads to revisiting the explanatory tables offered by the elites to explain the historical conflicts of Argentina. The opposition between civilization and barbarism is inevitably present in the background of the new images of the past. It is in this revisionist context that a school pedagogy of memory emerged. In the following sections, I will try to contextualize it, focusing on some of its visual expressions.

Three Configurations of Memory

Practices interested in evoking and recovering the recent past, particularly memory pedagogies, have been characterized by the importance of visibility and the use of images. The materials used within the framework of educational policies are substitutes for these memory practices that used visual records, first as a denunciation pattern and later as educational material.

Relatives who demanded the “aparición con vida”, that is “appearance alive” in the maximalist protest logic of “They took them alive, we want them alive”, had to certify, or rather, provide evidence of what had already been denied by the state. The proofs of existence were loaded with visuality – passport photos – and were extracted from the state’s own archive. According to van Alphen, “[t]he problem is that, like archival texts and documents, most photographs have the status of non-fictional testaments to what once was. But as images they do not articulate their content, opening up to a plurality of readings” (*Staging the Archive* 32). This second part of the research consists of three chapters in which three aesthetic configurations of memory are identified. The analytical focus on these configurations revolves around the use of images linked to the recent past. The periodization established among the configurations is delineated from the emergence and circulation of the first images of the disappeared to the production of the collection belonging to the “Education and Memory” Programme, with a focus on the volume *Pensar la dictadura: terrorismo de Estado en Argentina (Reflections on the Dictatorship: State Terrorism in Argentina)*.

The first memory configuration arises from 1977, during the initial rounds of the Mothers, where the documentary use of photographs of the disappeared children attached to bodies predominates. It is a stage marked by the prevalence of documentary photos that accompany the search and demand for detained-disappeared children.

The subsequent visual development around this theme partly responds to the question of the possibilities and difficulties of “representation”, addressing the problems posed by the inscription of the ineffable as a communication requirement. The pedagogical engineering work dedicated to memory practices and the transmission of recent history (to be developed in the following chapters) was influenced by the various responses given to these fundamental questions.

A second configuration is recorded in the mid-1990s with the formation of the HIJOS group and the artistic intervention of photos: the emergence of fictional photos. This configuration solidifies the link between art and politics, reshuffling images in a way that challenges the knowledge compiled in the Mothers’ counter-archive with new representation strategies. It is noteworthy that the initial initiatives were led by the second generation, concentrated in the HIJOS group, the group of *Family members of disappeared detainees*, and independent artists.

The third memory configuration refers to a new movement in the use of images mediated by memory policies. In this period, memory pedagogy emerges and becomes

inscribed in educational processes. Starting in 2003, and with significant emphasis in 2005 and subsequent years, the Argentine state subscribed to a plan for the production, transmission, and circulation of memories and stories of the recent past, strongly anchored in the educational system and, more specifically, in teacher training. Initially as a recipient of the demands of the “human rights movement” and later as a promoter of “memory policies”, the state played a material and symbolic mediating role between civil society and the recent past through systematic processes of memory institutionalization with a marked pedagogical intentionality.

The “pedagogy of memory” is an inevitable part of a widely recognized process known as the “memory boom” or “memorial explosion”, which was documented in Argentina towards the end of the 1990s (Lvovich and Bisquert; M.P. González and Pagès; Cucuzza and Spregelburd). According to Jelin’s studies (“Memoria y democracia”), the “pedagogical” concern usually follows a stage involving active political subjects demanding state and social commitment to justice processes. In a second stage, “the emphasis lies in the concern for legacies and their transmission, something we could define as the properly ‘pedagogical’ dimension of memory” (“Memoria y democracia” 226).

The material selection was conducted by taking as units of analysis a set of images divided into types: the document-image, the art-image, and the school-image. Specifically, a selection of documentary-format photographs used by the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers Archive), works by various artists who are relatives of disappeared individuals and independent artists (exhibitions of free circulation), and school photographs (production of the “Education and Memory” team: *Pensar la dictadura: terrorismo de Estado en Argentina* [*Reflections on the Dictatorship: State Terrorism in Argentina*]) were incorporated.