

# ON INNOCENT VICTIMS AND DEMONS IN ARGENTINA (1983 – 1985)

By Lucas Martín



On 24 March 1976 began the so-called “Process of National Reorganisation” (*Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*). This dictatorship, the last in Argentina’s history, marked a turning point, distinguishing itself from preceding dictatorships by waging terror and carrying out forced disappearances. The *Proceso* established an organised, covert structure for kidnapping individuals who were considered “subversive”, imprisoning them in clandestine prisons, torturing and murdering them. To this day, *los desaparecidos* (the disappeared) have remained hidden from the rest of the world because those responsible, with support from the state, secretly disposed of the corpses. According to the report by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP in Spanish), the number of *desaparecidos* totaled approximately 9 000 victims.<sup>1</sup>

The regime of State terror and forced disappearances was a pivotal moment in Argentina’s history, but it cannot be argued that it appeared out of nowhere. For years, the country’s history had been marked by increasingly repressive military dictatorships with deep-rooted social consensus. In the mid-1970s, the Argentine people were living in a country weighed down by growing violence and repression, where the legitimacy of political adversaries — the “enemy” — was progressively denied while democratic institutions were abandoned in the name of fundamental values or particular interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the victims were killed during the first two years of the regime. The number of victims is estimated to be about 11 000 if we include those killed in supposed escape attempts, confrontations with the military or police, and those few of the detained/disappeared who managed to escape or were later released. See Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos, *Las cifras de la Guerra Sucia* (Buenos Aires: s/d, 1988): 33; Prudencio García, *El drama de la autonomía militar. Argentina bajo las Juntas Militares* (Madrid: Alianza, 1995): 163, 166.

The situation that preceded the *coup d'état* had only served to exacerbate these features of the past. The growing political violence of the revolutionary left-wing, the government squads and the extreme right, the inefficiency of the government to face a multifaceted crisis, the “vacuum of power” and the death of President Juan Domingo Perón: all these circumstances created a unique context that gave rise to an unprecedented regime.

When the dictatorship came to an end in 1983, a year after the country's defeat in the Falklands/Malvinas War, the crimes committed during the *Proceso* became public. In this context of democratic transition — a moment of political revision and reconstruction — two forms of acknowledging the traumatic past took shape: the discourse of blame and innocence and the so-called “theory of the two demons”.

The aim of this article is to examine how these particular discourses crystallised: as they developed, they obstructed important aspects of the past which, had they been considered, would have recognised a certain degree of responsibility on the Argentine society's part and contributed to a better understanding of this traumatic period. In this sense, I will point out an occluded distinction between the victim of *repression* and the victim of *deception* in order to discuss the critical importance of the social dilemma of truth under dictatorship.

After the Falkland/Malvinas War — particularly after the new democracy was established at the end of 1983 — the public exposure to what had occurred during the dictatorship was overwhelming. These discoveries were presented to the public in three ways between 1983 and 1985. The first became known as the “horror show”: the media startled and saturated the public with the most heinous aspects of terrorist repression by the State, leading to society's rejection of these crimes as irrational and inhumane.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Inés González Bombal, “ ‘Nunca Más’. El juicio más allá de los estrados”, in Carlos H. Acuña, Inés González Bombal, Elizabeth Jelin *et al.*, *Juicio, castigos y memoria. Derechos humanos y justicia en la política argentina* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1995); Claudia Feld, *Del estrado a la pantalla: Las imágenes del juicio a los ex comandantes en Argentina* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 2002);

The second moment was marked by the work done by CONADEP, a commission created by executive decree to establish the truth regarding the crimes committed during the dictatorship. CONADEP was the place where survivors and family members of the victims went to testify and were received within the sober framework of a state-sponsored institution which was comprised of figures whose integrity was amply acknowledged by society. The work of CONADEP changed the tone of the accounts of what had actually occurred as a growing number of testimonies and evidence revealed the systematic nature of the crimes. The general response of Argentine society was moral condemnation, as symbolised in the expression *Nunca más*<sup>3</sup> (Never Again), the title of the book on the Commission's report (which soon became a best seller).

Finally, the third type of public presentation was the trial of the dictators who had ruled the country — nine Commanders of the Armed Forces. The solemn tone of courtroom proceedings subdued part of the sensationalist aspects of the “horror show” whilst the moral condemnation of *Nunca más* was institutionalised by the authority of a renewed Judiciary. This did not, however, keep emotions from playing an important role before, during and after the trial. It was in these years of transition, political revision and reconstruction that the discourse of blame and (the myth of) innocence, as well as the “theory of the two demons”, took shape as the preeminent ways of acknowledging the traumatic past.

The discourse of blame and the “myth of innocence” had a dual origin: the public exposure to the atrocities committed and the ensuing trials. First, the constant media coverage of horrifying images and testimonies led the spectator to establish a direct emotional bond — one that was not mediated by any type of reflection — with the pain of the surviving victims and the loved ones of the victims who did not survive. This bond highlighted the innocence of the victims and

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Emilio Crenzel, *La historia política del Nunca Más. La memoria de las desapariciones en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más. Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*, (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1984).

condemned the perpetrators. There was thus identification with the victims in general, particularly with the “extreme victims” or “innocent victims”<sup>4</sup>: the children, elderly, pregnant women, *etc.*, the cases in which the crimes reached new peaks of monstrosity and became even more alien, thus increasing society’s certainty of its own “innocence”. In addition, society reacted as if all this were a novelty when the events were in fact quotidian truths that citizens had opted to ignore or tolerate. The CONADEP Report gave evidence to this blame/innocence discourse by revealing the systematic nature of crimes, and public consensus further fostered this discourse as well.

Secondly, the trial of the dictators contributed to spreading the discourse of blame/innocence by giving a biased perspective which focused on the events that would establish the criminal responsibilities solely of military and police officials, based on legal definitions of the crimes committed — the victims being taken as mere civilians, as simple human beings without political identities. By overlooking the fact that most of the victims were political and even armed activists, society freed itself from the need to address the incurred political responsibility, first by fostering the “consensus against subversion” that favoured the coup and secondly, by ignoring or remaining silent before this unparalleled repression — hidden, but nevertheless perceptible — which the former consensus upheld.

Society thus manifested its indignation in an emotional, moral way, focusing it on the armed forces and police; the only “guilty” parties because they had borne arms, kidnapped, tortured, murdered and deceived.<sup>5</sup> For their part, the victims and the society at large identified

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<sup>4</sup> The term is taken from Bombal, “Nunca Más”, 206. See also Claudia Hilb, “Responsabilidad como legado”, in César Tcach (Ed.), *La política en consignas, Memoria de los setenta* (Rosario: Homo Sapiens, 2003); Hugo Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente. Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002): 136 - 137; Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo call this moral identification of society with the victims the “myth of innocence”, in *La dictadura militar (1976-1983). Del golpe de estado a la restauración democrática* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2003): 487 - 491.

<sup>5</sup> Guillermo O’Donnell, *Contrapuntos. Ensayos escogidos sobre autoritarismo y democratización* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1997): 157; Jaime Malamud Goti, *Terror*

with each other within a retrospective projection encompassed by the “myth of innocence”. The new beginning of democracy thus lacked any political reflection on the past.<sup>6</sup>

On a deeper analytical level, it could be said that Argentine society was declaring itself to be implicitly innocent in two regards: as a victim of *repression* and of *deception*. While the account of *repression* confirmed the innocence of a powerless, subjugated society, the account of *deception* — clandestinity and lies — revealed society’s *ignorance* of the events that extended innocence to include the silence that society had maintained under the regime.

So, as we see, a second myth arises from the first, the “myth of ignorance”, allowing us to highlight an occluded gap in the discourse of the transition. We find ourselves before two figures of the victimised society. On one hand, the dual discourse of blame and victimisation created the figure of society as a victim of State terrorism. Society identifies with the victims of repression, especially, as aforementioned, with the “extreme, innocent victims”. On the other hand, there is the supposed ‘revelation’ of an ignored truth that confirms the figure of innocence of society as a victim by evoking the clandestine nature of the state terror, particularly the practice of forced disappearance.

There is clearly a gap between these two figures: as society accepted the public accounts of the truth as a revelation, its identification with the victims of repression became more problematic. By identifying with the direct victims of terror, society denied its own ignorance, an ignorance that it attributed retroactively when it heard the accounts of horror as if it were the first time.

How can one ignore and at the same time suffer from terror? How can

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*y justicia en la Argentina. Responsabilidad y democracia después de los juicios al terrorismo de Estado* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Even the new claim for human rights, whose disclosure changed the Argentinian political culture, lost its political tone within that diffuse “solidarity of sentiments”. Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente*, 119 - 120; and Bombal, “Nunca Más”, 204 - 205.

society present itself as a victim of terror and simultaneously claim to have been deceived about what actually happened? As could be seen in the testimonies of surviving victims during the Trial of the Juntas, the victim who in fact survived the “clandestine torture centers” presented a truth that they came to know through experience but could not voice after the regime’s demise.

We believe that this neglected gap between the victim of repression and the victim of deception reflects the complexity of the reality experienced by society during the *Proceso*: there were those who knew what was going on but were paralyzed with fear, there were those who did not want to know (willful and consciously ignorant), and there was a limited number of those who, despite the danger, bravely denounced what was happening and demand the truth (the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in particular). The clandestine nature of the sordid system and the subsequent detailed unveiling to the public nourished the idea of a novel truth, from which Argentine society adopted the role of the *innocent victim* without further nuances, thus hindering any reflection and shifting to a moral, emotional discourse of blame and to the myth of innocence.

The so-called “theory of the two demons” crystalised in the same context. According to this “theory” — considered by some to be a “thesis” or “scheme” — rebel terrorist groups, as well as those led and supported by the State, carried out many acts of extreme violence against one another that were equally reprehensible and demonised. The newly-elected democratic government partly supported this view when it decided to bring justice to both the leaders of the military and the guerrillas. President Raul Alfonsín’s own words seem to provide the terms for this “theory” when he said that “the intention had been to fight the demon with the demon, turning the country into a hell-hole”. This could also be observed in the “Prologue” to the CONADEP Report<sup>7</sup> as well as in the speech that Antonio Tróccoli (Minister of

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<sup>7</sup> The very beginning of the Report stated: “During the 1970s, Argentina was torn by terror from both the extreme right and the far left”. It also describes a “diabolical technology... employed by people who may well have been sadists, but who were carrying out orders”. See also the reference to Dante: “The victims were then taken to a chamber over whose doorway might well

Domestic Affairs) gave as an introduction for the televised transmission of the Commission's Report. Minister Tróccoli stated that CONADEP's Report had settled only "one side of the drama", the other side being that of the "the subversion and the terrorism encouraged from abroad", in other words, communism. In his view, also being the official public one, both "messianic projects" ended up being pushed into a "diabolical cogwheel mechanism of death and terror"<sup>8</sup> during the 1970s within a "weakened society".

Unlike the dual discourse of blame and the innocent victim, this "theory" *explains* the horror by extending its interpretation into the years before the 1976 coup to include the actions of the aforementioned revolutionary organisations. As critics of this theory note, the main feature of this framework lies in the implicit and unrecognised: the role of society in the origins and justifications of the *Proceso*. "Subversion" *explains* State terrorism to such an extent that society appears as an external spectator who witnesses the confrontation of the two demons, thus confirming the notion of its innocence and acquitting itself from any responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

Both the figure of the *innocent victim* and that of the *two demons* have historic roots. The first can be found in the social representations of the 1970s which interpreted political reality in terms of "chaos vs. order" and "war".<sup>10</sup> Political violence was actually the most salient political problem at that time. The theory of the two demons, however, encapsulated those discourses that were not fully compatible: the discourse of chaos/order, connected with internal government policy, while the warrior refers to foreign affairs or civil war. It could be said

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have been inscribed the words Dante read on the gates of Hell: 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here'". The English version of the Report is available at: [http://web.archive.org/web/20050211130829/http://www.nuncamas.org/english/library/nevagain/nevagain\\_001.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20050211130829/http://www.nuncamas.org/english/library/nevagain/nevagain_001.htm).

<sup>8</sup> For President Alfonsín's and Minister Tróccoli's words see the video produced by Memoria Abierta: <http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/materiales/nuncamas.php>.

<sup>9</sup> Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente*, 37, 15, 40; Novaro and Palermo, *La dictadura militar*, 491.

<sup>10</sup> Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente*, 18, 56 – 57, ff.

that the theory of two demons combined them in a sort of “diachronic civil war” in which State terror acts as a substitute punishment for revolutionary “chaos”. Nonetheless, society had not blindly embraced any of the discourses during the 1970s: it had kept a sensible *distance* from them. Armed leftist groups moved towards militarisation and secrecy in the hope that a new military repression would raise awareness that did not exist in society.<sup>11</sup> This is also why the dictatorship chose not to seek the people’s explicit support once it was installed, in spite of the fact that its leaders were aware of the broad social consensus that justified their actions. In short, if it is true that the discourses of “chaos” and “war” played an important role in the representations that circulated during the 1970s, it is also conversely true that these representations, especially that of “war”, were far from undisputed by society.<sup>12</sup>

To express it more succinctly: Argentine society did not blindly embrace a totalitarian movement nor did it purposefully divide itself into a civil war society. The consensus it provided the dictatorship — a consensus that allowed the horror to occur in Argentina — was a negative consensus “against subversion”, one that established *distance* from what was occurring. Nevertheless, this distance is different from the distance represented by the two retrospective discourses of the new beginning of democracy.

How does a distance that had given shape to a *consensus against subversion* become a distance in which society becomes *innocent*? Two modifications in the representations of the 70s could be pointed out in this recreation of the new democracy. First, the military was no longer part of the “order” — it had become one of the “demons” — and second, the idea of “war” (or fight) drives out the idea of “chaos and order”. These two modifications involved two important shifts, fostering the image of a distance that accompanies innocence.

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<sup>11</sup> Pilar Calveiro, *Violencia y/o política. Una aproximación a la guerrilla de los años 70* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2005): 104 - 105.

<sup>12</sup> See Lucas Martín, “Dictadores preocupados. El problema de la verdad durante el ‘Proceso’ (1976 - 1983)”, in *Postdata. Revista de reflexión y análisis político* 15, 1 (2010): 75 - 103; also, Novaro and Palermo, *La dictadura militar*, 33 - 34, 130.

The first is a specific product of the “theory of the two demons” and it involves moving the discourse of “chaos and order” to the discourse of “war”. While during the violent 1970s the military appeared as a promise of “order” that would put an end to the “chaos”, during the years of the democratic transition, the *alternatives* of (negative) chaos and (positive) order became an *antagonism* between two negative extremes: the two ‘demons’. There is thus a retrospective modification of the images, as the military were turned into demons, whilst they had not been seen as such in 1976 — at least not by the widespread “consensus against subversion”. This change permitted the retrospective projection of the image of society that is simultaneously victim and spectator. In fact, to create this image, the figure of war is much more convenient than the *ordenancista* (“disciplinarian”) figure of chaos and order.<sup>13</sup> While the figure of war maintains a distinction between fighters and civilians — giving way to the image of the innocent distance of those outside the battlefield — the figure of chaos and order makes moral condemnation difficult without making certain concessions, given that all of society was implicated, either as active participants of the chaos or calling for order.

The second shift lead society from a distance that can be considered “decisive” to a distance in which society played the role of the innocent victim (and spectator) at the onset of state terrorism. Both figures of *consensus* and *innocence* are marked by their distance from the regime, but by moving from one to the other, the “decisive” nature of that distance is lost in society’s retrospect. It was then neither the perceptible distance that the military and the guerrillas had had to deal with, nor the necessary anti-subversive distance which made it possible to overlook the forced disappearances. It became an inconsequential distance, absent from the scene: the distance purely of a spectator, as

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<sup>13</sup> Although the *Proceso* had intended to distinguish itself from previous dictatorships by aiming at not just the restoration of order but also at the imposition of a radical change of Argentine society at large. However, the “disciplinarian” element was an important pillar of the claims to legitimacy in public speeches. Guillermo O’Donnell, “Democracia en la Argentina: Micro y macro”, in Oscar Oszlak (Ed.), *“Proceso”, crisis y transición democrática 1* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1987): 19 - 20, 29.

if society had never fostered a discourse of chaos and order that would shape the “consensus against subversion”.

In sum, through the image that Argentine society presented of itself during the transition to democracy, an image constructed through the two shifts in the image of distance described above, Argentine society could overlook its own decisive role in the recent past.

We can conclude that the discourse of blame and innocence and the theory of the two demons have contributed to crystallising a common meaning of the traumatic past that exempts Argentine society from taking responsibility. Acknowledging the restrictions of the domination, the effects of terror and the way in which society distanced itself from those who supported political violence; we could attempt to understand how society could contribute to its own subjugation to terror by means of retracing the rhetorical figures and shifts. According to our analysis, what the retrospectively occluded distinction between the victim of *terror* and the victims of *deception* demonstrates is that society could not have been oblivious to the truths “discovered” during the transition.

During the transition to democracy, why couldn't post-dictatorial society admit how much was known of what had gone on during the dictatorship, given that it would have been easy to argue that the terror and the threat of violence had forced them into silence? Why were there victims of *terror* and victims of *deception*? Why did the military resort to lies and secrecy while inflicting terror? Does not the mechanism of deception and secrecy reveal that the dictators had to lie to society because they needed its consent? Does this not indicate that the terror alone was not sufficient, that the military regime was not all-powerful? How truly powerless was Argentine society? What would have happened if the lies had not worked and the truth had been known, demanded and voiced? Did not Argentine society admit its own responsibility by avoiding the fact that the dictators' lies revealed the power that society could have wielded had it demanded the truth?

Although it is difficult to establish exactly how much society knew, there were certainly many events that indicate a certain awareness of

what was occurring<sup>14</sup>: the magnitude and extension of the crimes; the unnecessary and flamboyant display of power of the death squads; the corpses that were dumped in empty lots or found washed up on river banks; the people who suddenly stopped showing up at work, at the club, or around their neighborhoods, and the newspaper articles regarding people killed in suspicious confrontations with the security forces. All of these quotidian occurrences contributed to what was known at the time as the “stifling atmosphere”.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the clichés that circulated during the years of the *Proceso* (“I don’t know”, “don’t find out”, “don’t get involved”, “there must be a reason”, “they must have done something”) must all be taken as calls to silence and submission that were directed at something that was unsettling them. They indicate an awareness of what was happening and reveal that silence was, to a certain extent, independent of the terror. From this perspective, it is possible to posit that the aforementioned *decisive distancing* of society focused on *the truth* of what was actually happening. The rhetoric of the innocent victim, as well as the theory of two demons, aided Argentinians in turning the page of the recent past before having read the whole story.<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>14</sup> I intend to establish some milestones on this matter in “Le mensonge organisé pendant la dernière dictature argentine. Penser la société avec H. Arendt”, in *Tumultes* 31 (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2008): 195 - 214.

<sup>15</sup> Hugo Quiroga, “La verdad de la justicia y la verdad de la política. Los derechos humanos en la dictadura y en la democracia”, in Hugo Quiroga and César Tcach (Eds.), *A veinte años del golpe. Con memoria democrática* (Rosario: Homo Sapiens, 1996): 73.

<sup>16</sup> The author would like to express his gratitude to Wendy Gosselin and Valentina Iricibar for their help in the English version of this text.