

Oral History in a Museum of Terror. Reflections on the representation of the past and the presentation of testimonies

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There has been an enormous production of texts on memory, commemoration and oblivion in the last decades. There has also been the creation of cultural artifacts and experiences that range from the vast expansion of museums to the gathering of old objects and personal memoirs. In these last years we were witnesses of an extraordinary growth in enthusiasm for the recovery of the past. This affects history as well as national traditions. This movement, a true preservation mania, has gone through all sections of national life generating a true memory obsession, (*Memorabilia*)¹.

Pierre Nora explained this passion for memory through the *overheating of the present*, i.e., the acceleration of historic processes in these last years². Our end of the century culture fears oblivion so much that it tries to compensate these fears using survival and commemoration strategies. In general terms it is a frivolous return to a past that cannot be analyzed and therefore to a past that cannot contribute with the construction of a historic consciousness. Today we are witnesses of a *retro boom*, a *nostalgia* massive marketing. We find past recovery phenomena expressed in the form of antique furniture reproduction, autobiographies, the historic novel boom, and public discussions on anniversaries, commemorations and monuments. The world is being *musealized* and we all take part in this process, expressed in public and private ways. A museal sensibility seems to be occupying ever larger chunks of everyday culture and experience. Creation of new museums, concern for the ones that already

exist, building restoration, family tree reconstruction, recording of testimonies, gathering of old photographs are all different attempts to preserve the traces of a past that is likely to evaporate. And above all, fear facing a future that appears to be very uncertain and fearsome. This direction change, from the future towards the past and the re-negotiation of the past in memory discourse determine the way in which we understand contemporaneity. It certainly will have unquestionable effects on the future. According to Nora, past and future have become absolutely independent phenomena. It is in this dissociation between past and future where memory takes the part of a unique dynamic agent and a unique promise of continuity.

Giving content to collective memory has been an important landmark in the struggle for power. To get hold of memory and oblivion is one of the greatest concerns of classes, groups and individuals that have dominated and dominate historic societies. Oblivion and silences of history reveal these mechanisms of manipulation of collective memory.

These matters are usually highly controversial as in the great debate originated in France over the bicentenary of the French Revolution celebrations. Strictly speaking, this controversy was neither about the interpretation of the Revolution nor about the present political connections of the different interpretations. It was a debate about the idea of celebration itself; in other words, the discussion was about whether there was really anything to celebrate or not.³

In Argentina the same kind of debate emerged in 1996 related to the 20th anniversary of the military coup that overthrew Isabel Perón's government and give birth to the military dictatorship. Different commemoration attempts appeared highlighting the variety of meanings in the memory of the actors and the broad sense of recollections regarding the complex process of building a public memory.⁴

Over ten years before, in 1985, the Trial against the members of the Military Juntas was perceived by the Argentine society as a foundation act towards the re-establishment of democracy. Most of the events brought to court by the accusation had already been gathered and denounced by different human rights movements. The Comisión Nacional para la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP) (National Commission for the Disappearance of People), established by the Government in 1984 and chaired by the writer

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Ernesto Sábato, produced the most organic report about ways of repression and victims of illegal repression. This report, called *Nunca Más*, had great repercussion and mobilized society who demanded Justice.

The trial against the former commandants was foundational also in the sense that the demand for Justice coming from civilians was for the first time going through institutions. This fact was meant to be a major difficulty in order to avoid the repetition of violence and counter violence periods, a characteristic feature of great part of Argentine modern history⁵. The sentence of the trial was conviction for the former commandants, denial of the existence of a war as justification for their behavior and the promise of lawsuit against other people responsible of repression. The process opened by the trial, the disclosure of the violations that had taken place indicated the end of the *culture of fear* imposed by terror during the years of dictatorship. It was crucial in the shaping of new identity forms. After years of blindness, [society] knew about the existence of huge graves of unknown people, certainly victims of repression, about people coming from illegal detention camps, and about people denounced by former military agents. All these facts revealed a sinister history which, up to that moment very few people wanted to know about.⁶

During the years of the military dictatorship a group of mothers of *desaparecidos* (disappeared people) gathered every week in the Plaza de Mayo, wearing white scarves on their heads demanding to know the whereabouts of their children.⁷ The Mothers became the point of reference of a growing movement strengthened by the action of different human rights organizations. With the end of the dictatorship new social actors, old and new human rights organizations made themselves heard, taking the matter of *desaparecidos* to the center of the political arena. The revision of the recent past became an essential mechanism in the process of comprehension and construction of the future, and a landmark practice in the construction of collective memory. However, this transformation proved insufficient to eradicate the ghost of oblivion and impunity. And the symptoms of memory mutilation were multiplied.⁸

The opposing views between victims and the people responsible for tortures were part of the debate. It became evident that it was impossible to reach a shared interpretation of the past, an interpretation that proved

satisfactory for everyone. As a result of this a growing tension emerged between memory and oblivion.

The events that followed did not help to clarify these matters. On the contrary, by the end of 1986, during Raúl Alfonsín's government (1983-1989), the Punto Final (Full Stop) Law was passed. It limited in two months the summons to military officers that had taken part in the repression. The Obediencia Debida Law (Due Obedience), passed in 1987, massively exempted subordinate officers. Both laws limited any judicial action and signaled to Argentine society the end of the illusion of justice.

In 1990, during Menem's government, the pardon given to military officers found guilty and sentenced for having taken part in the repression during the years of the Military Process erased everything that the trial had established and did nothing more than hurt again the tissue of the newborn democracy. This was the most serious attempt of deprivation of an inheritance and a new compulsory oblivion over an important part of our recent history.

The memory of what happened in the last two decades is under construction, destruction and reconstruction, without knowing where or when the process will end and without producing a definitive vision of the past. Moreover, the unresolved matters are projected to a space of symbolic confrontation, where different actors try to obtain a hegemonic status and to impose their own vision of the past and its implications. This is why, on the 20th anniversary of the Military Coup, some people remembered the crimes committed by the torturers, while others talked about the errors of the extremist youngsters, and others about the military victory over subversion. Finally, other people like Ministry of Interior Carlos Corach, and President Menem himself spoke about the importance of national reconciliation, showing in this way the existence of different memories struggling among themselves, as well as a non-agreed vision of the past.

Something similar happened as a result of the Government's recently frustrated attempt (January-February 1998) of moving the ESMA (Navy's Mechanical School) and using the building, one of the greatest torture centers and a center of disappearance of people during the dictatorship years, as a monument of national reconciliation. This project had a paradoxical effect because for the first time since 1983, the year of democratic restoration, the government manifested the need to create a recent memory Museum, precisely on the grounders where the actual horror took place. The controversy

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surrounding the case highlighted the existence of different points of view regarding how to negotiate the past. There were irreconcilable differences among those who survived the experience, the memories, the official historiography, and the different actors who took part in the debate. In the first place, the government's proposal of pulling down the building, i.e., eliminating everything and putting into practice an active oblivion policy. At the same time different interpretations of memory were brought to the debate. Some people demanded remembering the wound, the trauma. According to this line of reasoning the *desaparecidos* were compared to the victims of the Holocaust, they were a scar on society. The emphasis rested on the need to remember in order to prevent history repeating itself. Others stated that the only real option was to remember the militants and vindicate themselves as their legitimate heirs. These discussions confirm the hypothesis that the places of memory are always places of trauma and that commemorations divide society as regards what should be commemorated and how. Museums, memorials, and monuments say something about the meaning of the experiences of the past. They are built to tell people things they already know or believe they know, things that have already been forgotten or things people never knew ever existed.⁹

What kind of memory should we bequeath to history? What kind of a museum can represent and encapsulate the conflictive memories held in the memorial site. In the case of the ESMA, we are dealing with a highly conflictive place, both because of what happened in there, and because of the way people remember and commemorate. But undoubtedly, it would be impossible to imagine the building of a memorial without taking into account the voices of survivors and witnesses, and eventually we should consider including the voices of those who were responsible for the repression. If this is not done once the survivors have disappeared there would be no memory to establish a connection between the present and the experience of the horror years, and any memorial would run the risk of becoming an empty construction, or simply, a place of forgetting.

The amazing strength of the survivors' voices may encourage us to collect them passively and with respect. However we want to state the complex process of remembering and the great challenges involved in working seriously and imaginatively with the witnesses' testimonies, specially, witnesses of extreme situations. The best homage we can render to the memory of

these people is to turn memory into history. And if we want to take advantage of oral testimony in the best possible way and to take out of it all its richness we cannot avoid the effort that historical work supposes.

A POSSIBLE DIALOGUE BETWEEN HISTORY AND MEMORY: ORAL HISTORY

The mere gathering of memories of the past for the sake of the past itself leads to memorialization. The solid constructions of national histories merge with memorialism and lead towards the consolidation of an official narrative that history has to criticize. Undoubtedly there are differences between history and memory as there are possibilities of negotiation between them both.

When reflecting over the nature of the process of remembering as a key element in the understanding of the subjective meaning of human experiences, and when trying to explain the nature of individual and collective memories, oral history allows the construction of an innovative and different dialogue between memory and history. It is a method that creates its own documents, documents that are, by definition, explicit dialogues on memory, where the person being interviewed becomes part of a triangle among past experiences and the present and cultural context where memories take place. It is not a simple challenge. Oral testimonies are not a simple and somehow adequate register of past facts. On the contrary, they are complex cultural products. They include interrelations whose nature is not easy to understand, among private, individual, and public memories, among past experiences, present situations and past and present cultural representations. In other words, testimonies of oral history are deeply influenced by the discourse and the practices of the present and belong to the field of subjectivity.¹⁰

The moment of creation of oral sources, the interview, has singular features. Grele has pointed out two central matters in the interview situation.¹¹ Firstly, the role of the interviewer in the creation of the document that is going to be interpreted afterwards, and the creation of that document within the limits of a historical and social period as well as a given historical tradition.

Memory is not a biological structure able to reproduce a clear image of the past just out of an adequate questionnaire. The way people remember, what they remember, is not a question of individual psychology. Age, sex, social background, and cultural representations affect the remembered aspects of life and the way they are remembered.

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The aspects connected to memory reliability have been a topic that has worried historians at least since the end of the 19th century. Many historians still have a strong suspicion as regards the authenticity of long term memory. This means, they suppose that the passing of time deteriorates memory and thus makes it less reliable. However Frederick C. Barlett's studies have shown that the process of remembering is much more connected to construction than to mere reproduction.¹² The memory process does not depend on individual understanding only. Memory is more exact when it fulfills a social interest and a need. Therefore, we cannot accept the prejudice as regards the non-credibility of the oral sources due to the existence of a defective memory.

On the other hand, it seems important to emphasize that we have no access to memory, only to recollections, and these are always a re-elaboration of what really had happened. Individuals build their memories as an answer to changing circumstances. The interest of testimonies lies not on the facts of the past but on the way in which memories were constructed and reconstructed as part of a contemporary consciousness.

As A. Portelli has pointed out, this is a common problem to all sources and today, we, historians have serious questionings as regards all documents.¹³ The discovery of oral sources sets up questions about the formation and the partiality of the sources, about the role of the observer, and about the social and historical contextualization. All these factors destroy the claims for objectivity, inherent to all historical sources and place the matter of subjectivity (both of sources and historians) in the center of historiography. Memory, as an interpretation of facts of the past is mixed with silences, errors and contradictions. This is not a proof of the non-reliability of memory as a historical source, but rather it suggests the complexity of human experience.¹⁴

Different lengths of time seem to have different impact on memory. The diverging time spans covered by Italian fascism, the nazi regime, and the Stalinist system produce important differences in the memories of those who actually lived the experience. On the other hand, the same experiences can have different effects, different meanings and importance to people according to their age groups and family structures.¹⁵ There are also memory generations, i.e., people who share a social experience which is historically different from others.

Apart from this, people working with memory should keep in mind that national traditions print in memory different developments. Samuel has contrasted the rich recollections of Spanish people about the Spanish Civil War with the oblivion of the general strike that took place in England in 1926.¹⁶ In the same sense Luisa Passerini tells us how workers from Turin remember aspects of every day life during the Mussolini period but do not remember fascism. This has allowed her to introduce the notion of silences in her study about the Italian working class.¹⁷ These silences can be explained as a collective self-restraint, a political scar left by certain experiences. Under similar circumstances, the collective silence notion has been confirmed by investigations on the nazi period carried out in Germany.

Both individual as well as collective memory are necessarily selective, memory is forced to forget, in Yerushalmi's terms. The possibility of forgetting supposes a complete exercise of memory. That is, recollection and oblivion are inherent aspects of memory. Yerushalmi shows us that it is impossible to live either remembering everything or forgetting everything.¹⁸

The reading of the last book of the Italian writer Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, *Los hundidos y los muertos* confronts us with the reality of the existence of memories which are definitely lost. The book is one of the most outstanding testimonies on the nature of life and the psychological implications of concentration camps.¹⁹ However, Levi insists on the personal nature of his recollections and thus the imperfect nature of his interpretation. The author, one of the few survivors of that camp, felt unable to recover the memory immersed in the depths where most of his mates had drowned. For Levi, as for Bettelheim, the great Freudian psychoanalyst, and as for Jean Amery, Hans Meyer's pseudonymous, the Jewish writer member of the Belgian resistance deported to Auschwitz, the burden of survival was excessive. All three, already old people, committed suicide. For them, perhaps, the past could be neither re-invented nor communicated. It was literally impossible to utter.²⁰ As Luisa Passerini points out, because of this fact we cannot have an optimistic view of memory, we must know that nowadays physical survival is not enough to leave trauma behind. These stories underline the complexity of memory weft and the difficulties that suppose living with recollections of that past.²¹ Charlotte Delbo, an Auschwitz survivor, shows us a different perspective. How can she explain to herself and to other people the unaccountable experience of carrying Auschwitz in her life and also an

afterwards.²² Using the metaphor of the serpent that changes its hard and wrinkled skin by a new, shiny and smooth one, Delbo says that she had left the camp having an external skin-armor, like the serpent's one. At the beginning she thought it possible to leave the wrinkles behind. But the process was gradual and longer than the serpent's. The human ritual of renewal means learning again habits of a previous life, such as learning how to use a toothbrush, toilet paper, how to smile, to remember certain smells, etc. Delbo admits that the process of skin transformation took many years. But, as was the case of the serpent, this change only meant an external one. For Delbo there are not only different memory levels, but also a memory skin, a resistant shell that cannot change, a scar whose impact is beyond her own control. It exerts its strength independently of the passing of time.²³

These matters confront historians to the problem of differentiated access, even impossible, when dealing with past or present traumatic experiences. Holocaust historiography offers a number of useful reflections. Saúl Friedlander points out the incompatibility between the survivors' "deep memory" and historical narrative. The deep memory of traumatic facts is essentially non-representable.²⁴ This poses a number of problems whose resolution requires a high dose of imagination. In the first place, it is important to discuss how history can recover memory, but above all, what memory should be transmitted to History. In the case of Holocaust, what kind of role had the survivors' memories in history? How will the past be remembered after passing from living memory to history?²⁵

Survivors' memories have played a lesser role in Holocaust historiography up to now precisely because of the strong distinction historians maintain between History and memory. This dichotomy leaves no room for the survivors' (witnesses') voices. We think, as stated by Friedlander, that this is one of the clearest limitations in Holocaust historiography. In such cases, historical understanding becomes impossible if we do not take into account the victims' and survivors' voices.²⁶ In this way, memory and personal narratives also become part of history. Both, historian's narrative and witnesses' memory are fundamental parts of historical reconstruction. The survivor's memory includes historical experiences as well as memory. Even silences are part of both. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet has pointed out, a history of Nazi crime without the integration of memory, -or, even better, memories-, and without taking into account memory transformations, would be a very poor history, a history which would lack its main source.²⁷

Testimonies are not only made up by historical facts but mainly by the impact that these facts have had. Not to include these testimonies would mean leaving apart the various reasons why survivors responded to the facts the way they did.²⁸

The Holocaust, as other extreme experiences, allows us to emphasize the need for history to recover both the facts of the past as well as their representation. History is more than sheer verification and description of facts of the past.

On the other hand, will witnesses be able to let the whole world know the harm they suffered in silence, a harm so incredible that they themselves perceive as unreal? For some of them the idea of justice meant telling the truth both legally and historically, while some others chose silence and tried to forget. Many times recollection had to struggle hard to call the attention and to counterattack the indifference of a world launched towards the future and willing to leave the past in its files instead of confronting it. This produced a need for truth, and the difficulty in expressing it, the personal urgency of remembering, and at the same time of forgetting, the willingness of giving testimony on one hand and of remaining silent as a protest on the other.

Taking all this into consideration, how can a historical conscience be developed in a critical and creative way? We ought to contribute from each of our disciplines in order not to let oblivion stay for good in our society and our culture. It is necessary to answer to the challenge of finding new ways of dealing with the past. This also implies admitting that most of the memories we work with belong to subjects that do not have access to their own representations and experiences and that their voices cannot be heard simply as such. Because, as Homi Bhabba pointed out, they are not "innocent voices", they passed through a dialogue with an interviewer, and also through their own ideologies. Therefore they are always constructed voices, produced voices.²⁹ Listening to those voices from that perspective will allow us to question the meaning of concepts such as nation, culture, identity, citizenship or community. A topic that should worry us, according to Shaid Amin,³⁰ is the fact that the testimonies of the subaltern are produced inside very well defined areas of power. Then the alternative does not consist in the mere search of new sources for a new history. It is important to try to understand the mechanisms a testimony uses to construct and constitute itself, and the way it works, being the raw material we have to work with.

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When distinguishing the role personal narratives played in the lives of witnesses, we can recognize that those narratives are part of history itself. To split the experiences from the meanings they had for the people that outlived those experiences is to deny part of historical reality itself. This is the main contribution that Oral History can bring both to the expansion of historical studies as well as a better understanding of the dialogue between history and memory. But we must keep in mind that testimony, whose raw material is memory, is not history. Thus it is not enough to recover memory and transmit it. It is essential to reflect on its nature, to understand it, analyze it, and fully incorporate it to historical narrative.

An Oral History of trauma which would follow the lines and worries we have stated should allow to present, in a museum or memorial, for example, elements of the past that could help to elaborate a historical conscience spanning over different generations and cultures. In this way the "voices" of the actors of this century's most dramatic cases will be able to validate their memories, against those who deny tortures, disappearances and genocide.

NOTAS:

¹ Raphael Samuel. *Theatres of Memory*, vol. I, Londres, 1994.

² Pierre Nora. *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 7 vols, Paris, 1983-1994.

³ Cfr. E.J:Hobsbawm. *Los Ecos de la Marsellesa*, Barcelona, 1992, François Furet, *Pensar la Revolución Francesa*, Barcelona, 1980.

⁴ Elizabeth Jelin, Susana G. Kaufman. Los niveles de la memoria., Paper for the III Encuentro Nacional de Historia Oral, Buenos Aires, 1997.

⁵ Luis Roniger y Mario Sznajder . The politics of memory and oblivion in redemocratized Argentina and Uruguay, *History and Memory*, Vol.10, N°1, 1998, pp. 133-169.

⁶ Luis Alberto Romero. *Breve historia contemporánea de Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1994, p. 325.

⁷ The Mothers, who started as a group of 14 mothers whose children had disappeared began to march, every Thursday, since March 1977 in the Plaza de Mayo, in front of the Casa Rosada, the Presidential Palace.

⁸ Hilda Sabato. Historia reciente y memoria colectiva, *Punto de vista*, N°49, August 1994, pp. 30-34.

- ⁹ Tony Judt. A la recherche du temps perdu, *The New York Review of Books*, december 1998, pp. 51-58.
- ¹⁰ Luisa Passerini. Ideología del trabajo y actitudes de la clase trabajadora hacia el Fascismo. In Schwarzstein, *op. cit.*
- ¹¹ Ronal Grele. La historia oral y sus lenguajes en la entrevista de Historia Oral: Quién contesta a las preguntas de quién y por qué?, *Historia y Fuente Oral*, N°5, Barcelona, 1989.
- ¹² Frederick C. Barlett. *Remembering: a study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, Londres, 1932.
- ¹³ Alessandro Portelli, *op.cit.*
- ¹⁴ Editorial: .Oral History. *History Workshop*, N°8, Oxford, 1979.
- ¹⁵ Anne Muxel. *Individu et Mémoire Familiale*, Paris, 1996.
- ¹⁶ Raphael Samuel. .Desprofesionalizar la historia. *Debats*, N°10, Valencia, 1984.
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- ¹⁸ Yosef H. Yerushalmi .Reflexiones sobre el olvido. , in Y.Yerushalmi, N.Loraux, H.Mommsen, J.C.Milner and G.Vattimo. *Usos del olvido*, Buenos Aires, 1989.
- ¹⁹ Primo Levi. *Los hundidos y los salvados*, Barcelona, 1989.
- ²⁰ Gwyn Prins. *Historia Oral, Historia y Fuente Oral*, N°9, Barcelona, 1993.
- ²¹ Luisa Passerini. Introduction. in: Luisa Passerini (comp.). *Memory and Totalitarianism. International Yearbook of Oral History and life Stories*, Vol.I, Oxford, 1992.
- ²² Charlotte Delbo. *La Mémoire et les Jours*, Paris, 1985.
- ²³ Lawrence L. Langer. *Holocaust testimonies. The ruins of memory*, New Haven, 1991.
- ²⁴ cfr. Dominick LaCapra. *Representing the Holocaust. History, Theory, Trauma*, Ithaca, 1994; Saul Friedlander (comp.). *Probing the limits of representation. Nazism and the. Final solution*, Londres, 1992.
- ²⁵ James E. Young. *Between History and Memory. The Uncanny voices of historian and survivor. History and Memory*, vol.9, Nos. 1-2, 1997.
- ²⁶ Saul Friedlander. *The Shoah between Memory and History. , The Jerusalem Quarterly*, 53, 1990.
- ²⁷ Pierre Vidal-Naquet. *Los asesinos de la memoria*, Buenos Aires, 1997.

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²⁸ Geoffrey H. Hartman (comp.). *Holocaust Remembrance. The shapes of memory*, Londres, 1994.

²⁹ "Between Identities", Homi Bhabba interviewed by Paul Thompson, in *Migration and Identity. International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories*. Vol. III, Oxford, 1994. Also Homi Bhabba. *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994.

³⁰ Cf. Shaid Amin. *Event, Metaphor, Memory, Chari Chaura 1922-1992*, Berkeley, 1995.

RESUMO: O equacionamento da memória do trauma ditatorial na Argentina do final do século 20 passa pela representação e pela rememoração do passado. Sem ser necessária a musealização pela qual parece passar o mundo contemporâneo, a coleta dos testemunhos orais dos perseguidos e dos sobreviventes contribui para exorcizar os traumas do passado recente, criando uma consciência histórica que resgate o horror do passado e o previna no futuro.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Argentina, ditadura, memória, trauma, terror, museu.