

The Art of Not Forgetting
Preliminary Note

There is a quote by Jorge Luis Borges that refers to Buenos Aires, as follows: “It is not love that binds us but rather, fright; perhaps that is why I love you so much.” That quote has become anonymous and echoes a truth that touches many of us in relation to this city and to Argentina. Among other times, I remembered it when I returned to my country on July 15, 2005, a date apparently like any other at the moment of purchasing a plane ticket. It wasn’t until we landed that I realized there were other meanings that don’t seem so apparent, but they are there, piercing at just the right time: It was the anniversary of the “disappearance” of my brother, Gerardo Strejilevich, in 1977, kidnapped and murdered by the Argentinean military. They took a vital, young and, as was commonly referred to at the time, a “socially committed” human being, and transformed him into a sedated body to be tossed into the sea. On the following day, July 16th, was the 28th anniversary of my own kidnapping and detention in the same clandestine detention centre, the “Athletic Club,” euphemism with which the assassins named—with sinister irony—one of the places where extermination took place.

Whoever said that history is set in the past? The memory of terror is a permanent demand among us, an unavoidable exercise. Since dates undoubtedly possess their own resonance, this yesterday that questions us day after day seems to gain strength when the 30th anniversary of the military coup, March 24, 1976, comes upon us. This is why I feel it is timely to bring this book to light. Although it is a reading of texts that were published between the eighties and nineties, it seeks to demonstrate that testimony has not exhausted its social function:

to direct one's reflection upon what happened, what it represents, and to question the legacy of genocide.

It is obvious that my interest on the subject flows beyond the academic sphere. Nevertheless, is it possible to concentrate on this issue with the distance called for by theoretic discourse? "There is no science of tragedy or science of pain," a friend once said. "It would seem superficial and senseless to give dimension to the monstrosity of the events through theories that do not imply an objective examination of recent history" (Kaufman, 2001). In this examination, testimony plays an essential role, even when the survivor knows he must give testimony about the impossibility of giving testimony. Testimony speaks by delegation; it speaks for the "drowned", with the knowledge that that is impossible. Those who went through the worst did not leave a message, nor a text, nor a word, and this—as Giorgio Agamben anticipates—forces us to search for meaning within an unforeseen area, the gray zone (actually, an area of multiple nuances, as Pilar Calveiro states), where all of the distinctions of our world—what is good, bad, just, unjust—collapse and become confused, in which all parties that inhabit that world are touched by a daily reality in which victims can become executioners and executioners can become victims. That space outside the official map wherein power experiments with the human condition, the clandestine detention center, is not an isolated space but rather one of the keys to our contemporary world, the way in which sovereignty is exercised today in its more radical form. One must lend an ear, therefore, to those who bring their memories and their marks. Each testimony is a reflexive pain that confronts its wounds in whatever way it can. Not all survivors are able to comprehend the terror that pierced them, but their combined voices can, at least, indicate in what field the game destined to erase human identity and inject emptiness is played.

Testimony, as Levi and Agamben clarify, does not concern the establishment of facts with a legal process in mind. After all, the trial is not what matters. Truth has a non-judicial consistency; the *questio facti* cannot be confused with the *questio juris*. This is, precisely, what concerns the survivor: the sphere of human action above and beyond the law, everything that does not enter within a process (Agamben, 2000). This is not to say that trials should not be carried out, but law cannot exhaust the problem, and this is critical in a country where, according to Kaufman, “the punitive paradigm” (“judicial retribution of aberrant acts applied upon individuals responsible for acts classified by the Penal Code” (Kaufman, 2004) has prevailed, as though that were enough to explore and resolve the legacy of horror.

The economic and social crisis that took place in Argentina in 2001 brought to light, for many, the complicity between the dictatorship and the “neoliberal” capitalist project. This allowed for spontaneous opposition among the population which gathered in popular assemblies under the motto “all of them should leave.” But those who brutally bore the brunt of the crisis, those picketing and the unemployed, the homeless and the marginalized continue to protest and make their demands known, while the middle class considers them irritating elements within a society that seeks to function and needs to be in motion. Echoes come back to haunt us of those military men who harassed the *Madres* with their “circulate, circulate,” those ever-present voices living in gaps within the present, showing how authoritarianism and contempt for others definitely continues to be rooted within a culture as a legacy, and in that sense, seems crystallized.

Nevertheless, after the crisis of 2001, the collective discourse changed in some respects. The relationship between exclusion through extermination and social exclusion became tangible. Genocide, that which human rights organizations are in charge of denouncing decade after

decade, became known, at least symbolically, as a mark that is incumbent upon society as a whole and not just upon those directly affected. The unyielding ethical demand on the part of human rights organizations inspired the government of Néstor Kirchner to generate policies that allow the country the possibility to establish minimum distinctions to exit the gray zone in which all of society has been swimming since that time.