

Violence, Trauma, and Frustration in Brazil and Argentina: The Role of the Historian*

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ABSTRACT

Violence is one the main analytical keys for the so called “traumatic events” in the 20th century which include the extremely violent military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). From this premise, this article argues that although Brazil’s military dictatorship was also very repressive, the notion of frustration, rather than violence, is the most adequate to understand the process. These questions necessarily evoke the difficulties historians experience regarding subjects that are taboo, sensitive or traumatic. The article concludes with a proposal on how to solve these difficulties.

Keywords: traumatic events; military dictatorship; violence, frustration; Latin America.

Violence. This is one of the main analytical keys for those dealing with Nazism, Latin American military dictatorships, and genocides in the 20th century. Other traumatic events have been studied according to this point of reference, based on the analysis of the Second World War and the Holocaust as emblematic episodes. From this perspective, the last Argentinian military regime (1976-1983), an extremely violent one, has been used as a reference to analyze other Latin American military dictatorships, such as the one in Brazil (1964-1985). Brazil's dictatorship, however, was less violent. Based on the discussion of these issues, I intend to argue that, although the Brazilian military dictatorship was also very repressive, the notion of frustration rather than violence is more adequate to its understanding. Inevitably, these issues address the difficulties experienced by the historian in relationship to tabooed, sensitive, or traumatic themes. At the end of this article, I will present a proposal to solve those difficulties.

The idea of considering violence a remarkable aspect or a “common denominator” of the 20th century emerged at its very beginning as a prediction,¹ but it was the Holocaust that focused attention on the problem. This theme has been extensively discussed and it is not necessary to revisit it. What I would like to highlight is that the perception of the Holocaust as an “index” for the 20th century and the failure of Enlightenment has turned it into a kind of “*metáfora de otras historias traumáticas*,” in the words of literature specialist Andreas Huyssen.² To this extent, there would be something in common—above all among historical processes—in the aftermath of traumatic events in countries that experienced totalitarianisms, military dictatorships, the apartheid in South Africa, and the genocide policies in Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, among others. Henry Rousso emphasized that the context of the late 20th century has established a correlation between phenomena such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the indictment of former heads of the German political police in the 1990s, the trial in France of Second World War crimes, and the fall of Latin American military dictatorships, making them part of a moment that could be compared.³ Dominick LaCapra thinks that the research on the Holocaust is not “narrowly confined” to the Nazi genocide, in so far as there would be “significant and mutually informative relations” between the massacre perpetrated by Nazism and other genocides or limit events.⁴ However, he calls attention to the difficulty of dealing as a whole with tragedies involving individuals in different situations, because it would be necessary to take into account national specificities and avoid a generic discourse about losses.⁵ For Argentinian literature professor Beatriz Sarlo,

¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Brace & World, 1970), 3.

² Andreas Huyssen, *En busca del futuro perdido: Cultura y memoria en tiempos de globalización* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001), 17.

³ Henry Rousso, “El duelo es imposible y necesario”, *Puentes* (Diciembre 2000): 39.

⁴ Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 269.

⁵ Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” *Critical Inquiry*, v. 25, n. 4 (Summer, 1999): 698.

the debates on the Holocaust and the democratic transition in Southern Latin American were interwoven in the mid-1980s, but those who accepted this model were more interested in denouncing violence than detecting national specificities.⁶

After traumatic events, historiography quite often assumes a condemnatory tone, a consequence of an understandable tendency we all have to condemn evil. Many of us are challenged to take a position, as historians, in journalistic articles in which we express this propensity.⁷ On those occasions, the connection between history of the present and politics is manifested in irrefutable ways.⁸ However, when producing historical knowledge, the condemnation of evil is almost a truism. This ethical, moral, and political tendency, irresistible when we tackle the traumatic events of the 20th century, can compromise our practice. Throughout this article, I hope to make my position clear, a position that does not disregard solidarity with the victims of any violence. But I understand that the political, ethical, and moral commitments surrounding the professional activity of historians dealing with violence should not hide the need for historical distance, not in the sense of an objectivism referred to neutrality pretensions, but taking into account an effort for objectivity that needs to be revalued.

One of the risks of the above mentioned tendency is uncritical adherence to generalizing discursive prefigurations. In an effort to build narratives related to the logic of violence, these prefigurations not only overlook specificities and empirical evidence, but also produce naïve and simplistic explanations. The explanatory scheme, in which violent regimes generate fear leading to the apathy of social movements and blocking an intended opposition, is not uncommon.⁹ One example of this perspective might be found in authors who adopted the “society of fear” notion. For them, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay had “fear-mongering regimes” in the 1960-1980 period during which a “culture of fear” existed. Sometimes this perspective encompasses the whole of Latin America, where an atmosphere of insecurity, anxiety, and suspense would have prevailed over any other sentiment.¹⁰ In

⁶ Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado. Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo. Una discusión* (México: Siglo XXI, 2006), 60-61.

⁷ See Guillermo O'Donnell's impressive article “La cosecha del miedo,” published in *Nexos en línea*, Mexico, 4. Jan. 1983.

⁸ On this theme, see: Thomas L. Haskell, “Objectivity: Perspective as Problem and Solution”, *History and Theory*, v. 43, n. 3 (Oct. 2004): 357, and Pieter Lagrou, “L'histoire du temps présent en Europe depuis 1945, ou comment se constitue et se développe un nouveau champ disciplinaire”, *La Revue pour l'Histoire du CNRS*, n. 9 (Nov. 2003), accessed February 24, 2013, doi: 10.4000/histoire-cnrs.561.

⁹ Patricia Weiss Fagen. “Repression and State Security”, in *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*, eds. Juan Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen and Manuel Antonio Garreton. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 63. Joan Dassin. “Testimonial Literature and the Armed Struggle in Brazil,” in *Fear at the Edge*, 174. Maria Helena Moreira Alves. “Cultures of Fear, Cultures of Resistance: The New Labor Movement in Brazil,” in *Fear at the Edge*, 189.

¹⁰ Dirk Kruijt and Kees Koonings. “Introducción: la violencia y el miedo en América Latina,” in *Las sociedades del miedo: el legado de la guerra civil, la violencia y el terror en América Latina*, Dirk Kruijt and Kees Koonings, eds. (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2001), 37.

addition, sometimes Latin American countries are deemed inferior to the “free societies,”¹¹ subjected to all types of instability, and seen as incapable of developing the pluralism that would characterize the United States of America.¹² In addition to the lack of empirical evidence for such generalizing affirmations, these interpretations tend to privilege dichotomic views according to which “societies of fear” were formed above all by perpetrators and victims: “[...]fear seem[s] to pervade society as a whole. Each person seems to be facing the extreme Sartrean dilemma of having to choose whether to be a hero or a traitor. Everyone is afraid of everyone else.”¹³ In this type of analysis, there is no space to perceive the support provided by part of the society to the authoritarian regimes. At the most, fear would generate public support for repression.¹⁴ The analysis of the armed struggle violence is also impaired, as this analytical scheme views the leftist militants merely as victims.

There was a lot of violence in Argentina’s recent history and it would be impossible to understand it without taking into account that phenomenon. It is not my purpose to discuss it in detail,¹⁵ but to call attention to two aspects that make it distinctive when compared to Brazil: the great visibility of the military repression and the extensive practice of violence by the armed struggle. Although one can identify a pattern of conflict characterized by violence since the 1943 coup d’état, as a “specific form of blocking the political system,”¹⁶ starting in the 1960s, that pattern would assume peculiar contours, especially after the great social uprising known as the *Cordobazo* (in 1969), which would be mythologized as the prelude to a great revolution, based on the idealization of the *pueblo en armas*. More than ever, violence would become a “*característica constitutiva de la vida cotidiana en la Argentina*.”¹⁷ Prior to the 1976 coup, violent actions had already reached a paroxysm, and even in the Isabel Perón government (1974-1976) the state repressive action known as the “*Operativo Independencia*” to annihilate the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) had been ordered. “*Cuando se produjo el golpe militar, la sociedad estaba agotada (...) La necesidad de exterminar a la subversión, que se inscribía en una lógica guerrera bastante difundida, también era una verdad*

¹¹ Juan E. Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen and Manuel Antonio Garretón, “Introduction. Fear: a Cultural and Political Construct,” in *Fear at the Edge*, 2.

¹² Norbert Lechner, “Some People Die of Fear: Fear as a Political Problem,” in *Fear at the Edge*, 28.

¹³ Manuel Antonio Garretón, “Fear in Military Regimes: An Overview. Fear: a Cultural and Political Construct,” in *Fear at the Edge*, 13.

¹⁴ Patricia Weiss Fagen, “Repression and State Security,” in *Fear at the Edge*, 41.

¹⁵ Two well-founded syntheses of the recent Argentinian history are found in Paula Canelo, *El proceso en su laberinto: la interna militar de Videla a Bignone* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2008), and Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo, *La dictadura militar (1976-1983): del golpe de Estado a la restauración democrática* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2003).

¹⁶ Emilio Dellasoppa, *Ao inimigo, nem justiça: violência política na Argentina 1943-1983* (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1998), 30.

¹⁷ Guillermo O’Donnell, *1966-1973 El Estado burocrático autoritario: triunfos, derrotas y crisis* (Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano, 1982), 266.

admitida en amplios sectores de la sociedad.”¹⁸ Just like in Brazil, there was a feedback between the armed actions by the Left and the military repression: “*la violencia se justificaba si era de los amigos o aliados, y se escarnecía si era de los enemigos o de los adversarios.*”¹⁹ However, unlike Brazil, armed struggle was very intense in Argentina, just as military repression was quite visible. After the *Cordobazo*, violent attacks, many of which resulted in deaths, became part of everyday life: the assassination of general Pedro Eugenio Aramburu in 1970, robberies of arms, occupations of media vehicles, attacks against military garrisons, kidnappings of businesspeople, assassinations of military officers, and so on.²⁰ The ERP defended the revolutionary violence and sought popular support through its periodical *Estrella Roja*, which had a column in 1972 entitled “*Crónica de la guerra*” with news of the armed actions.²¹ Mário Firmenich, the head of the guerrilla organization *Montoneros*, described in detail the execution of Aramburu in 1974.²² Viewing itself as an army battling another army, the guerrilla inspired fear, even among its adherents, many of whom remained active despite the obvious superiority of the repressive forces because they dreaded execution, as the death penalty was imposed by the armed organizations on their deserters.²³

The Argentinian military repression did not try to hide itself. Even before he assumed power, still as general commander of the Army in the government of Isabel Perón, General Jorge Rafael Videla publicly ensured that Argentina would be pacified, albeit at the cost of many deaths.²⁴ In 1976, Colonel C. A. Castagno said that the victory against subversion depended on the support to the Army: “*los delincuentes (subversivos) no pueden vivir con nosotros.*”²⁵ The head of *Operativo Independencia*, general Acdel Vilas, said the population, out of naivety or indifference, could not be complicit with the subversion.²⁶ There were many aggressive manifestations by Argentinian military who not only publicly expressed their barbaric positions, but also seemed to have wanted to give them broad visibility. Gendarmería commander Agustín Feced declared to the newspaper *La Prensa* that there was no more

¹⁸ Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición: los campos de concentración en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2008), 153.

¹⁹ Carlos A. Floria and César A. García Belsunce, “La cultura de la violencia,” in *Historia política de la Argentina contemporánea 1880-1983* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1988), 208.

²⁰ On those episodes, consult, among others, Oscar Anzorena, *Tiempo de violencia y utopía, 1966-1976* (Buenos Aires: Contrapunto, 1988), Richard Gillespie, *Soldier of Perón. Argentina's Montoneros* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Arturo Illia, 1988), Andrew Graham-Yool, *De Perón a Videla* (Buenos Aires: Legasa, 1989), and Alejandro Lanusse, *Mi testimonio* (Buenos Aires: Lasserre, 1977).

²¹ I thank María Paula Araujo for kindly providing her text “Memória e debate sobre a luta armada no Brasil e Argentina” for consultation. Her text will soon be published in the collected works “História e memória das ditaduras do século XX” by Editora FGV, Rio de Janeiro.

²² “Mario Firmenich y Norma Arrostito cuentan como murió Aramburu,” *La Causa Peronista*, 3 de setiembre de 1974, Año 1, n. 9, 25-30.

²³ Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición*, 20.

²⁴ XI Conference of Armies, Montevideo, Oct. 23, 1975. *Clarín*, Buenos Aires, 24 Oct. 1975.

²⁵ *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 22 Jan. 1976.

²⁶ *La Opinión*, Buenos Aires, 25 Nov. 1976.

room for dialogue, as the defeat and annihilation of the armed struggle would be achieved with arms.²⁷ Rather than hiding the repression—as was done in Brazil—the Argentinian military seemed convinced that they would get society to support the repression. For the military, all society was aware of what was happening: “*no hay ignorantes, hay cómplices, suicidas, especuladores políticos o traidores a la causa del mundo libre*”—said the Buenos Aires province governor general Ibérico Saint Jean in 1978.²⁸ In the case of Argentina, there is no exaggeration in saying that the military repression went beyond the limits of a simple “cleanup operation,” promoting an atmosphere of terror and fear: “*Ametrallamientos constantes, patrullas lentamente recorriendo las calles a toda hora, cadáveres en los baldíos [(...)] Nadie quería escuchar pero era imposible apartarse de ese clima.*”²⁹ Systematic disappearances and clandestine detention and execution centers—true concentration and extermination camps—completed this terrible scenario:

*Gran parte de la sociedad quedó inmóvil, expectante, entendiendo a medias de qué se trataba pero sin atinar a reaccionar, aterrada. Si había algo que no se podía aducir en ese momento era el desconocimiento. Los coches sin placas de identificación, con sirenas y hombres que hacían ostentación de armas recorrían todas las ciudades (...) Casi todos los sobrevivientes relatan haber sido secuestrados en presencia de testigos. Decenas de cadáveres mutilados de personas no reconocidas eran arrojados a las calles (...) nadie podía aducir desconocimiento (...) había colas de familiares de desaparecidos frente al ministro del Interior (...) Prácticamente todos los políticos del país no sólo conocían la existencia de campos de concentración sino incluso las dependencias en las que funcionaban algunos de ellos (...)*³⁰

During the military regime in Brazil, there was no such dynamic intensely marked by violence. The Brazilian military were not confronted by an active and violent leftist “subversion” when they staged the 1964 coup; there was only the risk of expanding popular achievements, such as the agrarian reform defended by deposed president João Goulart.³¹ Also, there was no history of violence prior to the coup. Armed actions by guerrilla organizations were few and were soon controlled by repression. The repression in Brazil used efficient and brutal mechanisms after 1968 through the decree known as “Institutional Act No. 5” which not only launched a “cleanup operation,” but also established complex systems to control society through censorship, espionage, political propaganda, and the fight

²⁷ *La Prensa*, Buenos Aires, 16 Aug. 1977.

²⁸ *La Opinión*, Buenos Aires, 29 May 1978.

²⁹ Julio E. Nosiglia, *Botín de Guerra* (Buenos Aires: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, 2007), 163.

³⁰ Pillar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición*, 149-151.

³¹ For an overall picture of Brazil’s recent history, consult Thomas Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), and the four volumes by Elio Gaspari, *A ditadura envergonhada, A ditadura escancarada, A ditadura encurralada, and A ditadura derrotada* (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras, 2002-2003).

against alleged corrupt people. Some of these “systems”—such as the censorship of public entertainment and espionage—were not clandestine and were supported by preexisting legal structures.³² The Brazilian military tried in every way to hide the repression and, when confronted with evidence of torture, they affirmed it was an excess, deviations by a few. Thus, Brazil’s military regime, viewing society as unprepared and subjected to the action of “demagogic politicians,” was above all marked by those forms of social control such as censorship, propaganda, and other related initiatives. Out of 80 prohibitions determined by the censors in the 1971-1972 period, 39 were directly concerned with confrontations between the repressive forces and left-wing militants.³³ The political propaganda machine of the Brazilian military regime broadcast elaborate films on television dealing with national “grandeur” and the supposedly optimistic character of Brazilians. Some of them were great hits with the public.³⁴

The main difference in the Brazilian case is of scale: the modest dimension of the armed struggle and the smaller number of deaths by the repression. However, it is not this macabre accounting that shows the inadequacy of using the notion of violence to analyze the Brazilian dictatorship. It is a matter of perception, of social experience: to a large extent, the censorship hid from society the repression against the armed struggle, seeking to conceal the violence in an attitude that marks the history of Brazil, deemed “bloodless” exactly by those propagandists of the two authoritarian regimes that devastated the country in the 20th century, the “Estado Novo” (1937-1945) and the military regime.³⁵

Despite these differences—which do not signal merely an academic correction of a comparative nature—diverse circumstances led to the creation in Brazil of a prevailing memory of the dictatorship that chose as an emblematic event the confrontation between the left-wing opposition and the repression, attributing to this confrontation a centrality that is far from being supported by empirical evidence. This began under the military regime in the period known as “political opening,” the long transitional process controlled by the military that was initiated in the government of General Ernesto Geisel (1974-1979). With the toning down of censorship, former armed struggle militants were able to publish their memoirs, not surprisingly portraying the issue of violence as a privileged topic and viewing themselves in a romanticized perspective.³⁶ Photographic records of the 1968 student protests against

³² Carlos Fico, *Como eles agiam: os subterrâneos da ditadura militar — espionagem e polícia política* (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2001).

³³ “Divisão de Segurança e Informações do Ministério da Justiça” Fund, Arquivo Nacional, Series “Movimentos Contestatórios à Ordem Política e Social”, Censorship Report, file n. 50756, box 592/05132, pages 6-24.

³⁴ Carlos Fico, *Reinventando o otimismo: ditadura, propaganda e imaginário social no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 1997).

³⁵ On the “Estado Novo”, see Lucia Lippi Oliveira, Mônica Pimenta Velloso and Angela Maria de Castro Gomes, eds., *Estado Novo: ideologia e poder* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1982), and Dulce Pandolfi, ed., *Repensando o Estado Novo* (Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 1999).

³⁶ See, among others, Fernando Gabeira, *O que é isso, companheiro?* (Rio de Janeiro: Codecri, 1979), and

the dictatorship became iconic, and virtually all events that mark the history of that period nowadays exhibit them.

In the 1979 Amnesty law, the crystallization of a binary interpretation of the Brazilian military dictatorship had a singular moment, elevating the issue of violence to an analytical key and choosing as protagonists the repression, the armed struggle, and the other protests by the Left. Signed by the last general-president João Figueiredo, the law was preceded by a popular campaign initiated in 1975 that began with complaints lodged by wives and mothers of political exiles.³⁷ The campaign had a hopeful tone and spread throughout Brazil under the motto “*anistia ampla, geral e irrestrita*” (broad, general, and unrestricted amnesty). However the military government viewed the issue from another perspective: in the context of the political opening, the amnesty should exempt the military of any responsibility regarding the repression and should allow the return of political leaders who would create new parties in Brazil, thus weakening the then only opposition party, the “Movimento Democrático Brasileiro” (MDB).³⁸ The draft legislative proposal was sent to the National Congress in 1979, and parliamentary negotiations resulted in a kind of pact, where amnesty to political exiles would be granted in exchange for pardon for all crimes committed by the repression. The parliamentarians consolidated the image of the former leftist militant as a heroic and romantic youth during those negotiations, attempting not to aggravate the violence of the armed struggle.³⁹

Five years later, still in the context of the very long democratic transition in Brazil, society was galvanized by the huge popular campaign in favor of direct elections for the president of the Republic. The slogan *Diretas, Já!* (“Direct Elections, Now!”) ended up giving the name to the movement. It tried to confront Geisel’s project for a “slow, gradual, and safe opening”—which, in addition to other preliminary stages, such as the reduction of censorship in 1975, the revocation of Institutional Act No. 5 in 1978, and the amnesty in 1979, presupposed indirect election in 1984 of the first civilian president, through an electoral college whose majority was made up of parliamentarians who supported the regime. Crowds gathered in several Brazilian cities making the campaign rallies events that could not be ignored even by the main television network that supported the regime. The atmosphere was festive, but there was also a strong political component. Popular celebrities such as singers and actors animated the audiences, but the crowds were also moved by opposition leaders, closely

Alfredo Sirkis, *Os carbonários: memórias da guerrilha perdida* (São Paulo: Global, 1980).

³⁷ Heloisa Amélia Greco, “Dimensões fundacionais da luta pela anistia,” PhD diss., Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2003, and Fabíola Brigante Del Porto, “A luta pela anistia no regime militar brasileiro: a constituição da sociedade civil no país e a construção da cidadania,” PhD diss., Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2002.

³⁸ The military regime allowed the political parties to function during most of the period, although it imposed a series of restrictive measures to their action.

³⁹ Carlos Fico, “A negociação parlamentar da anistia de 1979 e o chamado ‘perdão aos torturadores,’” *Revista Anistia Política e Justiça de Transição*, n. 4 (Jul-Dec. 2010): 318-332.

following speeches by governors, parliamentarians, and trade union leaders. In order to have direct elections, the National Congress had to pass a constitutional amendment, but it was impossible to pass this amendment without the support of pro-government parliamentarians. The campaign for direct elections awoke generous feelings of hope among Brazilians and many people believed in its success. Once the defeat was confirmed as Congress failed to pass the amendment, television programs showed people crying throughout Brazil, just like when the national soccer team is defeated in the World Cup. As planned by the military, the president was elected indirectly, through negotiations that enshrined conciliation among political elites.⁴⁰

After the end of the military regime, again unlike Argentina, Brazil experienced a period of silence during which no one talked about the dictatorship. War and the trial of heads of state are among the most spectacular phenomena of political history: Argentina has marked its break with the dictatorship through the Malvinas/Falklands War (England's victory in 1982 accelerated the end of the regime) and the trial of the three military juntas in 1985. It was different in Brazil. As a kind of counterfeit of a rupture that never occurred and with the impunity of the military, the political elite and the mass media promoted the existence of a *Nova República* (New Republic) starting in 1985. This "New Republic" appropriated and gave new meanings to the symbols of the campaign for direct elections (green and yellow, the colors of the national flag, had been widely used in that campaign). It fed on the emotionalism resulting from the unexpected death of Tancredo Neves. The civilian president, elected by the electoral college, could not take office in that year.⁴¹ The country entered a kind of latency, but the absence of a real rupture and the beginning of a suspended phase did not lead to overcoming the past. Referring to World War II, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht stated: "something about that past and about how it became part of our present does not come to rest, and any approach to a solution would have to start by pinpointing what that 'something' might be."⁴² Ten years had gone by when the first redressing measures were taken by the Brazilian government in 1995, through a commission that recognized the *desaparecidos* as dead people. Other measures would follow, such as the creation of an intergovernmental commission responsible for granting compensation to the military regime victims in 2001 and, more recently, the installation of the National Truth Commission in 2012, in charge of identifying human rights violations in the period—but without power to impose any punishment.

⁴⁰ Ricardo Kotscho, *Explode um novo Brasil: diário da Campanha das Diretas* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1984).

⁴¹ Douglas Attila Marcelino, "O corpo da Nova República: funerais de presidentes e memória de Tancredo Neves," PhD diss., Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2011.

⁴² Hans U. Gumbrecht, "After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present". The manuscript was kindly provided by the author for consultation. Forthcoming from Stanford University Press in 2013.

It was in this context of measures of the so-called “transitional justice” in Brazil that comparisons with Argentina, mainly from human rights activists, were drawn.⁴³ If the military had been tried in Argentina, why could they not be punished in Brazil? In 2008, Brazil’s bar association requested the Supreme Federal Court (STF) to exclude the pardon to the military from the 1979 Amnesty Law. When this petition was finally judged in 2010, the STF maintained the prevailing interpretation according to which the crimes committed by the repressive forces were also covered by the amnesty. This rekindled the criticisms of the Brazilian transition and, soon afterwards, the creation of the National Truth Commission without power to punish also led to comparisons with Argentina, always taking into account the issue of the trial of the military.

The trauma of the brutal violence of the military regime marked the Argentinian transition. In the case of Brazil, the fundamental characteristics of the transition were the impunity and the frustration caused by the lack of trials to punish the military and the absence of a break with the past. This made the transition inconclusive, so to speak, a result of conciliation among political elites. It was this component of frustration—the amnesty that pardoned the military repressors, the failed campaign for direct elections, in sum, the awareness that the military had conducted the transition exactly as they wanted—that, in some way, stimulated timid initiatives of transitional justice in Brazil after the arrival of governments presided by persons who had fought against the dictatorship: Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and Dilma Rousseff. Brazilian society does not show any great interest in this issue, which is monitored mostly by human rights activists, thus reinforcing the confrontation between military repression and left-wing opposition (whether armed or not) as the emblematic event of the Brazilian military regime. As a consequence, the history of “common people” is practically ignored.⁴⁴

Historical research on these themes faces very delicate issues. When we deny the centrality of violence during the Brazilian military dictatorship, we seem to give the impression that we are minimizing the suffering of those who were tortured and killed. The same happens with the uncomfortable perception that not even the largest mass demonstration that ever occurred in Brazil, the “Diretas, Já!,” was able to alter, albeit minimally, the transition project conducted by the military. If the armed resistance was used by the military to justify staying in power and waging the repression, was the democratic resistance ineffective? How should the historian approach these delicate issues, these tabooed themes, without seeming

⁴³ In 2012, the movement *Levante Popular da Juventude* (Popular Youth Uprising) promoted in Brazil the “esculachos,” inspired by the Argentinian *escraches*, where protesters publicly shamed alleged agents of repression with chants and graffiti on their current residence’s wall.

⁴⁴ Symptomatically, the dossiers in Brazil’s national archives concerning repression victims who were not left-wing militants (public servants, for example) are all but unpublished, unlike those related to the armed struggle. See Carlos Fico, “História do tempo presente, eventos traumáticos e documentos sensíveis: o caso brasileiro,” *Varia Historia*, v. 28, n. 47 (Jan.-Jul. 2012): 43-59.

to be moved by a reactionary and objectivist inclination, concerned merely with small adjustments, insignificant issues that ultimately would offend the memory of those who suffered?

These difficulties impose on us the duty to adequately situate the role of the historian and the scope of historic knowledge, which are often overestimated. Presupposing understandings that have long been abandoned in the academic field, as those of the so-called “positivists,”⁴⁵ some criticize alleged intentions of historiographic monopoly or the incapacity of history to coexist with other interpretations of the past.⁴⁶ Similarly, it is not unusual to attribute very hard or unattainable tasks of a redressing nature to history, as if we could avenge past evils.⁴⁷ We expect history to abandon alleged arrogant pretensions, but at the same time, to compensate for the errors of the past. Well, its mission is more modest. Dealing with a traumatic past creates evident expectations of overcoming it, of finding a “solution,” a hope that if not totally in vain, cannot be concretized solely through historical knowledge. Here we note the complex relation between history and memory, so often discussed—but never settled. The fact is that history is not necessarily capable of working through trauma, as perhaps memory is. For Beatriz Sarlo, the “*modalidades no académicas de escritura*” could “*responder plenamente las preguntas sobre el pasado. Aseguran un sentido, y por eso pueden ofrecer consuelo o sostener la acción.*”⁴⁸

The demands posed to history seem to assume that in fact the discipline has the five attributes assigned by Cicero when he discussed the orator.⁴⁹ He tried to convince his interlocutor that there was nothing more important than a well-rounded orator capable of approaching any subject with elegance and propriety: no one else would be warmer in exhorting virtue, vehement in condemning vice, severe in reprehending corruption, elegant in exalting the virtuous, successful in comforting the afflicted. Referring to history, he said: “with what voice, unless the voice of the orator, can it be passed on into deathlessness?” It’s commonly held that historians are this all-powerful orator who Cicero praised, and the subject matter of our discourses—history—is almost sacred, because of “the light of truth”: what else could it be if not the refugence of time past itself that we would transubstantiate into reality in front of the audience?

⁴⁵ Márcio Seligmann-Silva, “Direito pós-fáustico: por um novo tribunal como espaço de rememoração e elaboração dos traumas sociais”, in Carlos Fico, Maria Paula Araujo and Monica Grin (Eds.), *Violência na história: memória, trauma e reparação* (Rio de Janeiro: Ponteio, 2012), 107.

⁴⁶ Marina Franco and Florência Levín, “El pasado cercano en clave historiográfica,” in Marina Franco and Florência Levín, comps., *Historia reciente: perspectivas y desafíos para un campo en construcción* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2007), 62.

⁴⁷ Roberto Pittaluga, “Miradas sobre el pasado reciente argentino: las escrituras en torno a la militancia setentista (1983-2005),” in *Historia reciente*, 148.

⁴⁸ Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado*, 16.

⁴⁹ De Oratore, livro II, cap. 9, 36. “*Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis, qua voce alia, nisi oratoris, immortalitati commendatur?*”

There is some correlation between the difficulty of approaching what I am dubbing “delicate issues” or “tabooed themes” and the supposedly unspeakable character of traumatic events—according to the literature that discussed the issue of the Holocaust in the last third of the 20th century.⁵⁰ This correspondence is evident in the testimonies by victims of repression in Brazil and Argentina. However, we can extend this correlation to other themes, whose approach is difficult given their political nature and/or temporal proximity. In studies of recent subjects we quite often note a gradual approximation towards delicate issues which, over time, can be dealt with in a critical manner, as it happens with collaborationism during the World War II. This indicates the need for distancing. This need does not refer only to the historian and the testimonies on the agenda. It also affects the public to which the historical narrative is addressed—which situates the problem in the political, ethical, and moral field of the tabooed or indecorous themes. The capacity of the reading audience to interact with this or that subject shifts over time, as highlighted by Mark Salber Phillips.⁵¹ For example, both in Brazil and Argentina, the criticism of the armed struggle was always a delicate issue. To discuss this subject while militants were being assassinated would have been somehow outlandish. According to Beatriz Sarlo, “*la crítica de la lucha armada (...) parecía trágicamente paradójica cuando los militantes eran asesinados.*”⁵² It was also impossible to criticize the armed struggle in Brazil when, under the dictatorship, the amnesty was being discussed.

For the historian dealing with contemporary history, addressing such traumatic testimonies or delicate themes is not just a methodological issue: who among us has not experienced being confronted in public talks and debates with narratives from memory always offered with an “*autenticidad de la que estamos acostumbrados a desconfiar radicalmente*”?⁵³ Before she became the first woman president of Brazil, the then minister of the Lula government (2003-2011), Dilma Rousseff—who had been a militant in the armed struggle during the military regime—intelligently used the sacredness of the victim’s testimony before a 2008 Senate Committee public hearing. One opposition senator disdainfully questioned the sincerity of her testimony, recalling that in the past when jailed by the dictatorship Dilma had lied to her torturers, giving them false leads. Visibly moved, she answered: “(...) I was savagely tortured, Senator. Anyone who dares to tell the truth to interrogators compromises the lives of his or her equals, delivers people to be killed. I’m proud of having lied, Senator. Because lying under torture is not easy (...) to bear torture is extremely difficult because we are all very fragile, and the temptation to tell the truth is very big. The pain is unbearable.

⁵⁰ See, among many other works, Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁵¹ Mark S. Phillips, “Relocating Inwardness: Historical Distance and the Transition from Enlightenment to Romantic Historiography”, *PMLA*, v. 118, n. 3 (May, 2003): 442-443.

⁵² Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado*, 23.

⁵³ Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado*, 93.

I'm proud to have lied because I saved comrades." Everything else that was being questioned was pushed into the background. The following day, the newspapers headlined the victory of the minister over her opponent.⁵⁴

It is even more difficult to approach the activities of the perpetrators, who, understandably, are almost always demonized when viewed solely from the perspective of the victims,⁵⁵ but who emerge disconcertingly humanized when seen through documents of that time.⁵⁶ Dominick LaCapra argues for the need to differentiate the analytical treatment of victims and perpetrators, but he admits that the latter can also generate traumatic testimonies, although we should counteract analogies.⁵⁷ Moreover, the extent to which these debates often consider testimonies as an exclusive source of traumatic events is notable. However, the differentiated heuristic status given to oral testimonies of people directly involved in traumatic episodes and to vestiges of other natures is obvious. Curiously, sometimes it seems to be necessary to call attention to documents of another type, such as the newspapers of that time, as if it were necessary to "seek permission" to research them.⁵⁸ In any case, there is a difference between the perception that torturers are common people and conciliatory or spiritually edifying descriptions. Christopher Robert Browning calls our attention to the fact that understanding the perpetrators' past has nothing to do with pardoning them. He felt the need to enunciate what should have been obvious: "individual human beings killed other human beings."⁵⁹ These difficulties are expanded when it is not easy to know whether someone was a victim or an agent of the repression, as in the following example.

In 1975, Silvaldo Leung Vieira was a young 22-year old man who had practiced photography since his childhood. In a course for São Paulo civil police photographers, he saw a professional opportunity that would allow him to "solve crimes." Once accepted, he began taking classes in the Universidade de São Paulo on October 8. Seventeen days later, Silvaldo was surprised by a strange directive: he should report to the *Departamento de Ordem Política e Social* (DOPS), the main repressive organ of the military regime in the city. A driver took him there. In one of the DOPS cells was the body of Vladimir Herzog, a journalist and Communist Party member, who had been arrested, tortured, and killed the day before. The repression agents wanted to simulate a suicide and had hung Herzog's body

⁵⁴ *Folha de S.Paulo*, São Paulo, 8 May 2008.

⁵⁵ An exception was annotated by Pilar Calveiro: "Esto es lo desquiciante, los desaparecidos solían ser hombres comunes y corrientes que también podían ir a misa los domingos". Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición*, 143.

⁵⁶ The classical example is the album "*Auschwitz 21.6.1944*", today at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, with photographs of SS officers having a great time in that concentration camp during the summer and fall of 1944, when the gas chambers worked at full steam.

⁵⁷ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 26 and 41.

⁵⁸ Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado*, 83.

⁵⁹ Christopher R. Browning, "German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, and Historical Reconstruction: Writing Perpetrator History from Postwar Testimony", in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 27.

by the neck, with a strip of cloth tied to the window bar. Silvaldo's photographic record, contrary to what the repression intended, ended up serving to unveil the suicide farce after technical analyses. Silvaldo continued to be called on to perform such "services" until he had disagreements with his superiors. He ended up fleeing the country and entering the US illegally. Almost forty years later he was located by a reporter from the newspaper *Folha de S.Paulo*.⁶⁰ Whether Silvaldo was an agent of repression or a victim of circumstances is very hard to say without going into nuances. Such cases require a careful approach and any affirmation we might make has to be, so to speak, "negotiated" with the reader.

The difficulties of enunciating traumatic events are correlated to those of delicate or tabooed episodes, but here an important issue stands out. As so often mentioned,⁶¹ such difficulties concern above all the victims. The problems usually faced by the historian increase when he or she approaches such events, but they are not related to the problems of the unspeakable. They are of another nature. For example, confronting conflicting testimonies—a procedure that usually enriches any analysis—becomes a risk when we compare accounts from victims and repression agents about the same episode: in the two cases, distortions, silences, or additions have very different reasons or motivations. Also, the usual procedure of microhistory and the history of everyday life, taking into account the day-to-day episodes, may lead to unwanted results when dealing with the figure of the torturer. When seen in his everyday life, a repression agent becomes humanized: the search for understanding should not imply "acceptance." However, we cannot cordon off this subject, ignoring this part of history.

The view of the historian as an all-powerful orator—going back to the analogy I proposed with Cicero's famous phrase—is correlated to the power of the testimony. Not the victim's testimony, but the testimony of the historian himself/herself. We all know that the emphasis on *videre* was present in several Middle Ages authors: we should narrate what we could testify to, as Isidore of Seville said, ensuring that ancient historians wrote only about what they had witnessed.⁶² This would be the entirely credible historian. However, the proximity to the narrated events—which, after all, indicates the historian's involvement in the fact he or she is writing about—became a reason for suspicion in the wake of the prevailing objectivist wave led by Leopold von Ranke in the 19th century. This was the reason for the true interdiction established by Ranke for history of the present.⁶³ This modality could not be objective because of the risk of the bias resulting from the historian's involvement. Thus,

⁶⁰ *Folha de S.Paulo*, 5 Feb. 2012.

⁶¹ See, among others, Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: the Process and the Struggle," in Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma. Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 61-75.

⁶² "*Apud veteres enim nemo conscribat historiam, nisi is qui interfuisse, et ea quae conscribenda essent vidisset.*" For an accessible version in English: *Isidore of Seville's Etymologies*, trans. Priscilla Throop (Charlotte: MedievalMS, 2005), vol. 1, 1, 41, 1.

⁶³ Leopold von Ranke, "Burnet's History of His Own Times." in Leopold von Ranke, *A History of England Principally in the Seventeenth Century, 1859-1869* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), vol. 6, 46.

what was earlier a guarantee of accuracy resulting from *videre*, has become suspect because of the risk of involvement, of bias. Hence, the notion of the need for a “chronological distance,” i.e., the historian could only be objective dealing with facts distant in time, with which he or she had no involvement.

The problem of distancing is central to history of the present, but has not been adequately addressed by authors discussing traumatic events. Dominick LaCapra calls attention to the need of taking into account “the implication of the observer in the observed.”⁶⁴ However, the main problem does not seem to be this type of transference, but rather the requirement of developing distancing or perspective, despite the absence of chronological distance. Perspective and chronological distance are sometimes confused. Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, assumed that chronological distance stabilized perspective.⁶⁵ However, it seems obvious that this perspective, as an angle or point of view, does not affect only the recent past: it is possible to analyze from different perspectives both a long gone phenomenon and a recent event. Obviously, the requirement of chronological distance does not lead to an analysis immune to viewpoints. Ranke himself assumed that the central issue was not the proximity or distance from his objects: “the difference of contemporary history from remote history (...) is only a matter of degree.” The search for the truth would depend on the historian’s moral character and on an attempt to overcome private perspectives: “the historian must gain an independent point of view from which the objective truth, a general view, opens out more and more.”⁶⁶ These statements by Ranke reveal his objectivism, but could surprise those who know him merely as the caricature he was reduced to in the early 20th century. They echo very contemporary demands because the moral consideration of sensitive issues, the search for an independent viewpoint, and overcoming particularisms are frequent challenges for the present-time historian. Everything we write about this past can have a use, an appropriation that will affect people who lived through it and are still alive.

Jaap Den Hollander assumes that we should preferentially adopt the notion of “distinction” instead of “historical distance.” Discussing what he classifies as a narrativist point of view in approaching a historical form, Den Hollander refers to Frank Ankersmit’s proposal of distinguishing between subject and object, or present and past, taking into account the notion of sublime. Ankersmit’s proposal of a “sublime dissociation of the past”—i.e., the radicalization of the subjective historical experience, the latter understood as the perception of some historical period—presupposes going past epistemology, moving beyond truth, dissociating experience from truth. Assuming the hypothesis of a direct encounter with the past, through an almost mystical perception, Ankersmit articulates the sublime historical experience with collective experiences, drastic changes, and large-scale

⁶⁴ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 36.

⁶⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, “Un historien et son temps présent.” in: Institut d’histoire du Temps Présent, *Ecrire l’histoire du temps présent. En hommage à François Bédarida* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1993), 102.

⁶⁶ Leonard Krieger, *Ranke: The Meaning of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 271.

history. This would be a philosophical counterpart to the psychological approach to trauma. The psychological approach is mobilized to the extent that the sublime experience would be one of loss of the “indiscriminate present” which, thus, becomes its past.⁶⁷ However, we are aware of the position argued by Ankersmit that specific periods of history are attributes of our description of the past, rather than attributes of the past itself. Well, if the specificities of an epoch are not in the past but in the narrative structures, how could we associate self-distancing to the “sublime historical experience” taking into account that the latter seeks to overcome “contamination” from linguistic structures?

According to Den Hollander, in order to dissociate from the past and expel it, we should create a distinction between subject and object through self-distancing, a type of depersonalization, similar to the psychological process in which the subjects are under the impression of being strange to themselves. In this fashion, there would be at the same time a direct and indirect contact with reality, a combination that would indicate the process of self-distancing and enable the subject-object separation.⁶⁸

These approaches touch two distinct but interconnected issues. After all, the impossibility of accessing the past refers not only to the obvious circumstance that it is no longer available as something tangible and concrete, but also to calling into question the validity of the vestiges left by the past, as elements that would enable us to support statements with truth claims. If the philosophical hypothesis of realism presupposes the existence of something outside the cognizant subject's world, we are still left with the problem of accessing that “something.” This problematic is different from another, more commonplace one, involving the idea that the more recent past affects us so strongly that we would be incapable of analyzing it without bias. Nevertheless, it is fairly likely that most historians analyzing recent phenomena would easily accept the philosophical hypothesis of ontological realism. It is also likely that they would be much more concerned with the second question: beyond the problem of whether or not is possible to know the epoch close to us (or any other past reality), i.e., in addition to the issues of accessing the past, there is the problem of this past's interference with us, the way it affects us.

Whether we call it chronological distance, perspective, or distancing, what is at stake is the issue of seeking for the maximum possible objectivity. This leaves us confronting the formidable problems of searching for the truth and accessing the real. These are aspects of an old epistemological debate that have become devalued since the so-called “linguistic turn.” Hayden White considers that our assumption that historical events express real stories is based on an equivocal relationship between “historical story-telling” and historical reality. For White, “stories, like factual statements, are linguistic entities and belong to the

⁶⁷ F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁶⁸ The proposal intends to overcome the historicist and narrativist understanding of the problem. Jaap Den Hollander, “Contemporary History and the Art of Self-Distancing”, *History and Theory*, , v. 50, n. 4 (December 2011): 51-67.

order of discourse.”⁶⁹ What was attractively “wild” (using the adjective Popper employed to recommend new ideas)⁷⁰ in Hayden White’s approach was his radical questioning. But what is fragile is the lack of distinction between the problematic consequences of the discursive character of historical statements and the “quasi” questioning of the philosophical hypothesis of realism, taking into account the difficulty of accessing the real—which unfortunately he never developed with full clarity. In fact, so many were the criticisms that White felt the need to refute that formalists, such as himself, “deny the reality of the referent” and adopt a relativism that would make possible, for example, a credible Nazi version of history.⁷¹

As chronological distance is not viable for the historian of the present time, other solutions need to be found. Some ideas already presented place the solution of this problem at the linguistic level. Assuming the incapacity of traditional modes of traumatic event representation, Hayden White proposed the use of a middle voice: “we must intend something like the relationship to that event expressed in the middle voice. This is not to suggest that we will give up the effort to represent the Holocaust realistically, but rather that our notion of what constitutes realistic representation must be revised to take account of experiences that are unique to our century and for which older modes of representation have proven inadequate.”⁷²

Dominick LaCapra affirms that it necessary to be sensitive to traumatic experiences and their treatment presupposes empathy, or what he dubbed as “empathic unsettlement,” which would have “effects in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method.” He questions White’s proposal of the middle voice, in so far as it recommends an “insufficiently modulated rhetoric.” LaCapra stays at the linguistic level defending the “third-person referential statements, direct quotations, and summaries or paraphrases.”⁷³

When we consider the different forms of enunciating past phenomena, this type of proposal makes some sense because the difficulty of enunciating traumatic events, particularly for the victims, can somehow be solved through internal diathesis, when narrated events refer to actions or states that affect the narrator—he or she is at the same time “center and actor of the event.”⁷⁴ However, when dealing with academic production of historical knowledge, this type of resort seems insufficient or even inadequate. That is not to say academic history

⁶⁹ Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 37.

⁷⁰ Karl Popper, “The Rationality of Scientific Revolution,” in Karl Popper, *Problems of Scientific Revolution: Progress and Obstacles to Progress in the Sciences* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 85.

⁷¹ Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” *Critical Inquiry*, v. 9, n. 1 (Sept. 1982): 131.

⁷² Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment,” 52.

⁷³ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 26 and 41.

⁷⁴ Emile Benveniste, “Ativo e médio no verbo”, in *Problemas de linguística geral* (São Paulo: USP, 1976). Also, see Roberto Gomes Camacho, “Em defesa da categoria de voz média no português”, *D.E.L.T.A.*, v. 19, n. 1 (2003): 91-122.

searches for—or is inclined to—an unshakable and insensitive harmonizing discernment.⁷⁵ To posit that the issue of the unspeakable more properly concerns the victims than the professional historian does not seem abusive. Certainly, historical research has difficulties addressing delicate contemporary themes, but this occurs for the simple reason that such an approach is hard for anyone, even for those who are not directly involved. This is not the only reason why themes such as the Holocaust took so long to become object of history. The history of military dictatorships faces similar problems. In addition to the usual heuristic difficulties, there always remain some suspicions that echo our understandable moral need to condemn evil and search for culprits. Daniel Lvovich states that German historiography was affected by a period of latency, characterized by a pact of silence involving survivors and perpetrators. However, he says that, on the contrary, in Argentina there was not a period of silence “*en el que la mayor parte de la sociedad haya optado por la negación y el intento de olvidar las experiencias traumáticas.*” This is true to a certain extent, because right after the end of the Argentinian military regime, the juntas were tried based on a series of testimonies. However, Lvovich himself calls attention to another type of silence, as the need to try the criminals imposed itself as a “*deber ético y político*” that excluded any questions about the responsibilities of the armed struggle—resulting in a complacent and comfortable interpretation of the past.⁷⁶ Thus, for the historian, the greatest difficulty does not seem to be the enunciation of delicate themes—correlated to the unutterableness of the trauma by the victim—but the need for distancing.

Martin Jay gets close to the proposal I would like to defend. He thinks that persuasion is not only established between first-order narratives and second-order reconstructions, but it is negotiated with the community of readers:

Historical accounts are, after all, only as persuasive as they are deemed to be by those who read them (...) This is the never-ending negotiation that we might call the art of historical judgment exercised in communal terms. “History” in this sense is not a single historian emplotting the past, but rather the institution of historians, now more often credentialed than not, trying to convince each other about the plausibility of their reconstructions. It is not so much the subjective *imposition* of meaning, but rather the intersubjective judgment of meanings that matters.⁷⁷

Jay refers to Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action, but his proposal of “intersubjective judgment of the community” is clearly derived from the Kantian perspective according to which if something is valid for those in possession of reason, then we will have

⁷⁵ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 35.

⁷⁶ Daniel Lvovich, “Historia reciente de pasados traumáticos,” in *Historia reciente*, 111 and 115-117.

⁷⁷ Martin Jay, “Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgments,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 105. Underlined in the original.

achieved a sufficient degree of objectivity.⁷⁸ Intersubjective criticism, or the idea of “mutual rational control,” was also discussed by Popper, for whom the objectivity of statements depended on them being able to be tested intersubjectively.⁷⁹

Hayden White identifies the plot of historical accounts to a demand for moral meaning that would allow them to have a narrative conclusion. This would result from the insertion of events into a given order of meaning, usually referred to as “theme” (for White, a “metaphysical principle”). Quite often—or always, according to White—historical narratives are in a field of concurrent possibilities; i.e., it is usually possible to choose at least two opposing explanations.⁸⁰ In the case of delicate issues or tabooed themes of recent history, this situates the historian in a universe of complex ethical and moral implications that should be taken into account.

For example, US historian Thomas Skidmore states that in Brazil, “the guerrillas’ principal effect was to strengthen the hand of those arguing for greater repression.”⁸¹ On the contrary, former militant Franklin Martins argues that the armed struggle had a huge impact on the democratic struggle and the resistance against the dictatorship—as he said during a television interview with journalist Kennedy Alencar, available on the internet.⁸² Typically, this is a “delicate issue” whose treatment is correlated to that of traumatic statements: by agreeing with Skidmore we could give the impression that we do not acknowledge the suffering of those who, having chosen the armed struggle, were tortured and killed by the military dictatorship they intended to confront; on the other hand, by adhering to Martins’ explanation, we would perhaps seem to justify the armed violence.⁸³

In a brilliant article published in 1988, Carlo Ginzburg provided what remains the best counterpoint to Hayden White’s original thesis. By correlating *enargeia* and quotations, he situated the problem of the effect of the truth at the narrative level, not as a constraint imposed by discursive prefigurations, but as a relation of trust or credibility established between historians and their readers. Ginzburg argued that this relation between history and rhetoric does not imply that the criterion for truth is the audience’s reaction. He views it to be above all a matter of persuasion, only marginally related to an objective test of

⁷⁸ “If the judgment is valid for everyone, provided only he is in possession of reason, its ground is objectively sufficient.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason, The Transcendental Doctrine of Method* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1933), 645.

⁷⁹ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 22.

⁸⁰ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry*, v. 7, n. 1 (Autumn, 1980): 23-24.

⁸¹ Thomas Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule*, 125.

⁸² On this theme, see Denise Rollemberg, “Esquerdas revolucionárias e luta armada,” in *O Brasil republicano. O tempo da ditadura: regime militar e movimentos sociais em fins do século XX*, ed. Jorge Ferreira and Lucilia de Almeida Neves Delgado (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2003), 43-92.

⁸³ Maria Paula Araujo discusses the self-criticisms of the armed struggle in Argentina, more advanced than in Brazil, in an unpublished text already mentioned entitled “Memória e debate sobre a luta armada no Brasil e Argentina.”

reality.⁸⁴ What I would like to add is that, in the case of traumatic events or delicate issues, the historian should address that audience not only as an orator who wishes to convince, but also as a researcher who in an interview or workshop will explain in detail why he/she arrived at certain conclusions; and why they were enunciated in a given manner. What seems to me essential is this attitude of sharing with the reader the research findings, as well as the rhetorical resources mobilized. This should be an element immanent to the historical narrative, not a secondary pedagogical, merely reiterative complement. Thus, in addition to *enargeia* or notes and quotations that presuppose a somewhat presumptuous control of instruments that are available to authors to convince their peers, I defend the properly narrative need for a disinterested sharing of the author's *métier* with the reader. Such sharing should be capable of guiding the reader through the research and thus making the reader "complicit" with the statements we want to support. Hence, I would argue that the defense of narrative conclusions with delicate ethical, moral or political implications should be supported not only by the usual procedures that ensure the intersubjectivity of the method in reference to the peers, but also by what I have dubbed the *making-of* or *behind the scenes* of history.

I believe that the historical narrative is capable of "narrating the events" and, at the same time, of encompassing the analysis of why we feel able to propose such statements as objectives—all this in the same narrative flow. On the contrary, this would not be so easily accomplished in other narratives, such as in cinematographic or theatrical ones. Commented explanations of their rhetoric and formal resources, and of the empirical references that constitute fictional narratives, would decharacterize them. In the case of fictional prose, this would compromise the verisimilitude of a novel, theatrical play or movie script. I am not referring to an occasional appearance of the narrator in the work, but to the full exposure of the author's options in developing it. Let us examine the case of the audio commentary by the director included in some film DVDs—there is the film and this extra bonus. However, the director's commentary during the full film exhibit (heard on an extra audio track) would hamper its full enjoyment, and perhaps someone would watch it only after seeing the film proper. In plays, authors or directors normally do not come onstage to explain why they made this or that choice of representation or stage markings, nor do they mention the empirical research to define the costumes and make the scene ring true (even if the play has a narrator/author/director).

I would say that the same does not occur with the historical narrative. As a historian, I could argue that in 1975—in the episode of the photography of Herzog's body—Silvaldo was unwillingly involved in a violent action, cooperating with the repression, although the episode was also fairly damaging to him. Simultaneously, I could share with my reader not

⁸⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, "Ekphrasis and quotation." *Tijdschrift voor filosofie*, v. 50 (1988): 3-19. I use the modified version published in Carlo Ginzburg, *A micro-história e outros ensaios* (Lisbon: Difel, 1991), 224.

only the empirical evidence I researched to support this statement, but also the rhetorical and formal care I employed to develop it. Thus, it would be possible to note the substantial and convincing nature of the interviews with Silvaldo, as well as the effectiveness of the document recording his punishment by the civil police for “failure to comply with his duties and disciplinary transgressions.”⁸⁵ It would also be fitting to warn the reader that I avoided the word “victim,” preferring the term “damaged,” or that my attitude of acceptance and empathy in relation to Silvaldo does not imply total identification with his behavior, thus sharing my concerns with the audience.⁸⁶ None of this would compromise the efficacy of the historical narrative. In other words, the exposure of our cautions and doubts strengthens the objectivity of our historical statements with truth claims.⁸⁷ As Carlo Ginzburg said, the exposure of doubts, uncertainties, and gaps is part of the search for truth.⁸⁸

To a certain extent, we have already done this through quotes, footnotes, and explanatory notes that supported our text. This is the established procedure geared mostly to peers and related to the search for objectivity. We should note that the historical narrative, in addition to traditionally having practiced the intersubjectivity of the method (at least since the 19th century), sometimes shares with the reader the rhetorical resources mobilized through metalinguistics, such as questions posed to the reader, the use of quotation marks, or commentaries on the vocabulary. However, this has been done by historians in an episodic way, almost always without full awareness of its scope and function. What I am proposing is a kind of radicalization of the intersubjectivity of the method and the formal control of the text, taking into account the reader. The implementation of this proposal will certainly imply a challenge to the writer, to the extent that it is not a mere transposition of the erudite apparatus to the textual body. However, this difficulty is far from insurmountable.

Alessandro Manzoni’s reference to “historical acceptance” (when he analyzed the historical novel) is equivalent to the notion of verisimilitude. It is independent, according to that novelist, of any explicit guarantee by the author: “*non fa nulla dal canto suo per avvertirvi che si tratta di persone reali e di fatti reali.*”⁸⁹ On the contrary, in the case of the historical narrative with truth claims, we use footnotes and quotes (among other erudite

⁸⁵ The document was located by reporter Lucas Ferraz. *Folha de S.Paulo*, 5 Feb. 2012.

⁸⁶ LaCapra distinguishes empathy from identification, and defines it as “an opening to the other that is related to transferential implication,” saying that its adoption does not exclude “the attempt to take critical distance.” Dominick LaCapra, *History and its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 198-199.

⁸⁷ For Jörn Rüsen, historical narrative “has to express its distraction within the methodical procedures of interpretation as well as in the narrative procedures of representation.” Jörn Rüsen, “How to Make Sense of the Past: Salient Issues of Metahistory,” *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, v. 3, n. 1 (July 2007): 211.

⁸⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, “Micro-história: duas ou três coisas que sei a respeito,” in *O fio e os rastros: verdadeiro, falso, fictício* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2006), 265.

⁸⁹ Alessandro Manzoni, “Del romanzo e, in genere, de’ componimenti misti di storia e d’invenzione,” in Alessandro Manzoni, *Opere Varie* (Milano: Fratelli Rechiedei, 1870), 462.

apparatuses) to support our statements. Above all, this is done for the sake of the community of historians. Yet, the traumatic episodes, tabooed themes, or delicate subjects really do bring about hesitation in the reader's mind (without mentioning the corresponding difficulties of enunciation for the victims, many of whom "disbelieve" their own experiences, or the recurring insecurities of interpretation experienced by the historian). Such reluctance is equivalent to the one we experience toward fantasy literature, because often it is very hard to believe that those episodes actually happened, or that a given interpretation might be adequate. For this reason, and to the extent we mostly depend on the judgment of those we write for, it is advisable for the historian to expand the scope of the intersubjectivity of the method, decisively addressing the reader not only with notes and quotes, but also by building a narrative that will encompass an analysis of its own enunciation.

It might seem as if I were proposing to add some "useless details," "insignificant notations," to use expressions mentioned by Roland Barthes when he discussed the effect of reality.⁹⁰ When Barthes highlighted the predictive dimension of narrative, he recalled: "someone says to the hero (or to the reader, it does not matter which): if you act in this way, if you choose this alternative, this is what will happen." Analogously, we could state: if you share with me the stages of the research I have done, you will probably arrive at the same conclusions. Thus, it is as if we did not offer a "thick description" of the details of reality, but a narrative of events that is trustworthy because it is founded in truth claims that do not result merely from the author's eloquence, but from an adhesion to the conclusions shared by the reader, *vis-à-vis* research stages that the reader can thus control—as much as our peers do. By sharing the interpretative possibilities brought about by historical research, as well as the rhetorical resources mobilized (to the extent this is possible), the historian would practice a kind of contextualization of historical research.⁹¹

Historians' treatment of the issue of violence in the Latin American military regimes has enabled us to analyze the complex ethical, moral, and political implications involved in the task. To face tabooed or delicate issues—the need for a critique of the armed struggle, examination of the support of part of society to the dictatorships, or the perception that violence is not always the best analytical key to understand authoritarian political regimes—demands a distancing that is imposed on all types of history, but whose relevance is transcendental in the case of history of the present. Such requirement for distancing should not be confused with the chimerical claim to neutrality of the 19th century scientific historicism. Nor can it eliminate the need for empathy toward the victims, which configures the delicate balance between distance and proximity, impartiality and involvement. LaCapra already mentioned

⁹⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 142.

⁹¹ To understand contextualization as a complex process that includes the readers, see Dominick LaCapra, *History and its Limits*, 192.

the apparent paradox that would exist in an objective history that included subjectivity through “empathy as a component of historical understanding.”⁹²

If the effort to elaborate traumatic memories finds in history only secondary collaboration, its role can be intensified through an open dialogue with the readers, with the radicalization of the intersubjectivity of the method and through the formal control of the text. A dialogue shared with the community of readers and not only with peers, through a procedure I dubbed the making-of or behind the scenes of history. For almost forty years since the so-called “linguistic turn,” the supposed fragility of the historical narrative relying on statements with truth claims has been underscored. However, the historical narrative possesses a virtue not yet sufficiently explored: it is especially tailored to analyze painful episodes of the recent past.

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⁹² Dominick LaCapra, *History and its Limits*, 198.