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Genocide as Social Practice

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Explaining Genocidal Social Practices in Argentina

The Problem of Causation

It is difficult to find authors who provide a comprehensive meaning to the events that occurred in Argentina during the military dictatorship of 1976 to 1983. Nevertheless, both during the dictatorship and since it ended nearly thirty years ago, there have been several more or less explicit attempts by politicians, journalists, and academics to make sense of what happened through—sometimes intuitive—causal models. For the sake of brevity, these events will be treated here as genocidal social practices despite possible objections to the term “genocide,” which I have already discussed in previous chapters.

Although this chapter sets out to explore these models, the lack of academic research and literature on the subject, together with the need for a case-specific approach, has led me to include works of journalism that do not necessarily come out of a formal academic research process. These explanatory models are interesting because of their potential for shaping collective memory through what I call the “symbolic enactments” of genocidal social practices.¹

The first section of this chapter critically analyzes the notion of a “Dirty War” against “subversion.” Although this way of narrating events is now largely discredited among the Argentine population, it still plays an important role in shaping some collective imagery and the way substantial sectors of the population still behave. We might describe these sectors as the “military circle” and its civilian supporters, in other words, hard-core members of the armed forces and the security forces, family, friends, and connections who, despite being a minority, continue to have a significant impact on the design of some government policies, and in some mass media.

It is worth mentioning that although this approach has been more or less discredited within Argentina, the term “Dirty War” to refer to the repression carried out by Argentina’s last military government remains popular abroad, especially in academic literature written in English, which tends to use it

almost exclusively. Let us begin, then, by examining the implications of the term “Dirty War.”

A “Dirty War” against “Subversion,” or Legitimizing One’s Own Genocide

One of the first works in which the perpetrators attempted to justify the type of process they were implementing was an early work by Brigadier General Acdel Vilas, the head of Operation Independence, or Operativo Independencia as it was called in Spanish. This was a military campaign to destroy the People’s Revolutionary Army (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo or ERP), a Trotskyist guerrilla group, which, by the end of 1974, had seized just over a third of the mountainous northwestern province of Tucumán in an attempt to copy the Cuban revolution. Operativo Independencia, which began in February 1975 under the orders of the democratically elected government of María Estela Martínez de Perón (better known as Isabel Perón), became a testing ground for the repressive methods implemented during the military dictatorship a year later.

Vilas wrote his book in 1977, only two years after carrying out the Tucumán campaign.² The interesting fact is that the publication of Vilas’s book was forbidden by the commander in chief of the army precisely because Vilas made no attempt to hide the actions of his troops against the civilian population of Tucumán or the role played in the campaign by concentration camps and scorched earth policies. On the contrary, it described the new forms of repression in enormous detail and offered an explanatory model legitimizing such actions.

In various passages of his book, Vilas refers to the irregular nature of the war waged in Tucumán and the influence of French counterinsurgency doctrines applied in Indochina and Algeria—for example in the following paragraph:

While I was flying, approaching, more and more, what would be for almost a year my combat trench, I thought again about the words a specialist in the glorious French army in Algeria wrote in his book—which was my bedtime reading during my spell in Tucumán. In *Subversion and Revolution* he wrote: “A slave to its traditions and training, the army is ill adapted to a war that military schools refuse to teach. In general, it insists on mounting operations against a slippery, uncatchable opponent, according to classical rules. Like a sledgehammer trying to squash a fly, it strikes, mostly at empty space, wasting considerable resources. Even a considerable increase in its resources would have no effect without first adapting its organization and tactics to a revolutionary war. The army should address the complex challenges of revolutionary war

in a new spirit, detached from all prejudice and with the determination to solve it.” The French officer’s pithy considerations summarized my own ideas and concerns regarding the operations that very soon, and after a century of peace, the brigade would begin against the country’s most dangerous and deadly enemy: Marxism.

In Vilas’s mind, this reflection justified the need for clandestine operations in a “Dirty War” that required—in his own words—a very different army from the traditional one, and, thus, different values, different morality, another way of carrying out social practices. It meant replacing a predominantly military social practice—war—with an eminently political one—the destruction of social relations in the civilian population or, as I define it elsewhere in this book, genocide.

In his book, Vilas emphasizes the lack of political support he received from Tucumán’s provincial administration, in particular from the governor of Tucumán, Amadeo Juri, and the legislature. As a result, Vilas felt the need to install a “parallel” authority to deal with the “core” of the problem: *the civilian population of the capital of Tucumán*. Not only did he aim to set up mechanisms to persecute the population and undermine solidarity, but also to “win the hearts and minds” of “civilians.”

This point goes to the heart of what I am arguing in this book. Vilas’s focus was not primarily the guerrillas and leftist insurgencies, or even their political fringes. The objective of Vilas’s actions was to develop a series of social practices focused on *the entire population of Tucumán*. The concentration camps set up in the province, in each city, town, or village, were intended to involve the whole of society either as victims or collaborators—or sometimes in both roles one after another.

Having adopted this line of reasoning, Vilas then justified the need to dispense with an independent judiciary and with the “old” ethical rules of war in order to impose a new model of counterinsurgency warfare. In his own words, he introduced

a Revolutionary Justice dispensed by special courts that worked on the pattern of military justice. Their characteristics were supposed to be: confession as sufficient evidence of guilt; assessment of the evidence left to the individual criteria of the judges; informal court procedures to prevent cases being dismissed or overturned on technicalities; and a system of personal responsibility for military officials involved in the preliminary investigations. I decided to dispense with justice, not without a war to the death on lawyers and judges complacent or complicit with subversion.

Vilas suspected that the battle in the mountains could not be won without first changing the balance of forces in the capital city of Tucumán and the

surrounding villages. This was a fundamentally *political* battle, even if it had a military outcome. And the political struggle for consensus, passive support, and collaboration—which meant, inter alia, recruiting informers—was to be won through terror.

Vilas himself recognized that the first Argentine concentration camp—the Escuelita de Famaillá, so named because it was an educational institution before being transformed into a clandestine detention center—was a theater of operations as important as the fighting in the Tucumán mountains, if not more so: “Now, if the fight in which we were involved depended on intelligence, the Meeting Place of Detainees was to be the key to the development of ‘Operation Independence.’”³

Vilas’s awareness of the *nature* of the conflict and his willingness to terrorize and/or kidnap civilians and murder them in concentration camps turns his writings into a sort of confession about the *genocidal nature* of the phenomenon, at least as Vilas and many of his fellow perpetrators perceived it. The only place in Argentina in which there was an armed left-wing militia with some operational capacity was the province of Tucumán; and yet the Argentine armed forces went on to target Argentine society as a whole, proof of which is that after the military coup on 24 March 1976, the whole of Argentina was criss-crossed with concentration camps, including territories where there had previously been no organized military forces or brigades.

Operation Independence became a testing ground for developing genocidal social practices that would later be unleashed on society at large. Concentration camps set up in the Escuelita and, soon afterward, in a dozen other locations in Tucumán together with the political measures applied by the leaders of Operation Independence in all cities and towns of the province of Tucumán—from campaigns of denunciation to decisions about the educational content to be delivered in primary and secondary schools in 1975—were a veritable field laboratory in which to test the action plan that would be implemented all over the country after the military uprising of 24 March 1976, against the government of Isabel Perón. Indeed, the military called this plan the “National Reorganization Process,” a term that—in my view—proved to be impressively accurate.

As regards political responsibility, however, Operation Independence was developed entirely by the public officials of a democratically elected government. This confounds those simplistic analyses of the 1980s that contrasted democracy and dictatorship and insisted in no uncertain terms that an extremist left-wing provocation was followed by an extremist state reaction, embodied in the military coup.

The planned and systematic genocide in Argentina started under a democratically elected government. The military dictatorship systematized it to a greater or lesser degree and applied it to the rest of the country, but it was first

developed at the provincial level in Tucumán. However, the persistent support given by President Isabel Perón and part of her cabinet to these genocidal social practices (against the lukewarm objections of the Tucumán provincial political authorities) was accompanied by an explicit decision to coordinate projects from the civil and military sectors.

General Ramon J. Camps, chief of police of the Province of Buenos Aires during the worst period of the repression, supported the notion of an ideological war. Though less precise than Vilas, Camps realized—somewhat belatedly, in his opinion—that “we have fought victoriously the effects of an evil, leaving intact the cause.” By this he meant that the armed forces had fought against the guerrillas, but the ideologists who were the root of the problem still had to be tackled.⁴

In 1977, Camps ordered the kidnapping of Jacobo Timerman, a Ukrainian-born journalist and founder of *La Opinión* newspaper and *Primera Plana* news-magazine. Timerman, who was Jewish, was accused of laundering money for the guerrilla organization Montoneros⁵ and was personally tortured by Camps on several occasions before his release in 1980. Based on Timerman’s so-called statements obtained under torture, Camps sought to demonstrate in his book *Caso Timerman: Punto Final* (The Timerman case: Full stop) that civil action—political, journalistic, and social—posed an even greater danger than military action. In Camps’s opinion, the National Reorganization Process should have recognized this more clearly and should have acted more harshly against the civilian population.

In short, the Dirty War aimed at “social reengineering” to achieve its objectives in a war that could not be won by military means alone but only through kidnappings, disappearances, torture, and the systematic destruction of the civilian population—in other words, through genocidal social practices. This was seen as a successful strategy by Vilas, a “national project” by the military dictatorship’s minister of planning, General Ramón Genaro Díaz Bessone,⁶ and as a failure and a mistake by Camps.

Genocide Denial: The “Final Document” of the Military Junta and the Wisdom of Hindsight

After Argentina’s defeat by the United Kingdom in the Falklands War on June 1982, Leopoldo Galtieri resigned as de facto president and was replaced by Reynaldo Benito Bignone on July 1, 1982. Discredited by the outcome of the war, the chiefs of staff of all three services also resigned, leaving a power vacuum. With rising inflation and the economy slipping into recession, the military began to look for what they called a “democratic way out,” and Bignone was given the responsibility of winding up the dictatorship and transferring power to a freely elected government.

During Bignone's period in office, two particularly important documents appeared. The first was the Military Junta's "Final Document" of April 28, 1983, providing the Junta's official, institutional version of events from the military coup until the end of the Falklands War, especially with regard to what they called counterinsurgency. The second was Law 22,924, the Law of National Pacification, published in September of the same year. Later dubbed the Auto-amnesty Law, it pardoned members of the regime involved in human rights violations. Later, in 1985, Bignone brought out a book entitled *El último de facto* (The last de facto government), which was reprinted in 2000 in a more extended form as *El último de facto II: Quince años después. Memoria y testimonio* ("The last de facto government II: Fifteen years later. Memory and testimony").⁷

All three publications speak of the "war against subversion" but are more careful than Vilas, Camps, or Diaz Bessone not to emphasize the illegal nature of such a war. More concerned about possible prosecutions for human rights abuses than about offering a clear account of the conflict, the 1983 Final Document and Law 22,924 emphasized that the actions carried out by the armed forces were "in the line of duty." With a thinly veiled threat to those who might think otherwise, the military argued that "the armed forces have acted and will act whenever necessary pursuant to an ongoing mandate from the National Government, using the experience gathered in this painful instance of national life."⁸ They recognized that "errors . . . may have been committed pursuant to the assigned mission." There was no longer any attempt to justify the illegal nature of these operations as earlier writers had done—only the "mistakes" and "excesses" committed in otherwise "legitimate" military operations.

It may seem surprising at first that the Auto-amnesty Law retrospectively absolved the military from criminal liability for their crimes right back to 25 May 1973, including the three presidencies of the democratic period between 1973 and 1976.⁹ This can only be explained by the fact that the genocidal policies implemented under the military government were a continuation of those developed between 1973 and 1976, and that illegal actions had already begun during this period. This is a matter to which I will return shortly, and that calls into question the sharp separation that the discourse of the democratic transition made between democracy and dictatorship in terms of genocidal practices.

As part of his apology for the regime, Bignone's book explains at greater length the meaning of the documents that his government produced. In his view, the military had saved the country from subversion in order to introduce a new democracy. Unlike Vilas or Camps, who were fascinated by the Dirty War and the new counterinsurgency methods, Bignone was "distressed" by such actions and gave his readers to understand that any "errors" or "excesses" committed were the result of historical and political circumstances. However, the good that had resulted—the salvation of the country and the introduction of a new democracy—justified the price the country had had to pay, even if the

security forces could not always be proud of the measures they had taken (although Vilas and Camps had certainly been very proud of them).

Bignone is repeatedly at pains to point out what he considers to be the “ingratitude” of those politicians who had gone along with the military government and the fight against subversion in the most unlikely places, and who were tearing out their hair—now that the battle was over—because a few mistakes had been made along the way. The list of politicians and journalists Bignone spoke with on a daily basis is interesting and suggestive of the limits—including the moral or ethical limits—placed on the Alfonsín administration. In fact, these limits were so strong that Alfonsín’s government could be described as “democratist”—in other words, democratic in appearance only. Certainly, Alfonsín’s government condemned the crimes committed during the dictatorship, but it did so in the abstract, placing all the responsibility on the military. It was careful not to dig deeper into the ways the military government had consolidated itself in power, including the many interrelationships it forged with political sectors of Peronism, with Alfonsín’s Radical Civic Union party, and with the provincial parties, as well as with journalists and judges who since had changed sides and now supported the fledgling democracy, forgetting their words, actions, and convictions of just a few years before.

Bignone’s conclusion is clear from the quotation at the beginning of his book, which echoes none other than Juan Jose Castelli, one of the country’s leading rebels against Spanish rule in the years before Argentina’s independence: “Were there other ways? Perhaps this was the case. We never saw them or believed that we would be able to do what we did by other means. There you have the results: enjoy them and put the blame onto us. We will be the executioners; you must be free men.”¹⁰ Castelli speaks of the country’s independence in the early nineteenth century. Bignone speaks of “reorganizing the nation” through murder and torture and the creation of a “new fatherland.” This fatherland would appear in all its glory in the Argentina of the 1990s, where the economic and political consequences of genocidal terror were played out in countless individual and collective practices, in both politics and business.¹¹

Bignone attempts to distinguish himself and most of his peers who, he claimed, had reluctantly done their duty, from people like Camps or Vilas, who had identified with the brutal methods required for the job. Here, it is worth repeating an anecdote recounted in his book, a conversation that occurred in the early days of 1971 and which, according to Bignone, makes *all the difference* between the two factions within the military that participated in the National Reorganization Process. In 1970, Bignone had taken command of the cadet corps at the National Military Academy when, to his surprise, the director of the Academy, Jorge Rafael Videla (later president of the first military junta of 1976–1980), ordered that First Lieutenant Aldo Rico should not be allowed to have cadets under his command. Bignone asked why and Videla supposedly

answered: "Because I want educators here, not people who will turn out killing machines." After the return to democracy in 1983, Aldo Rico led several mutinies requesting and in some cases achieving impunity for the perpetrators of the genocide.

Bignone's anecdote is quite astonishing. As the head of a government responsible for genocide, he quotes the man who led that government during its cruelest and bloodiest years as saying that he did not want future officers to become "killing machines." And Bignone ends his anecdote rather sententiously by stating: "This defined his [Videla's] concept of the military profession."¹² If the story is true, one cannot help remarking that both men underwent a radical change of heart in the five years leading up to the 1976 coup.

Beyond the contradictory nature of this anecdote, it is clear that neither Videla's nor Bignone's vision is that of Vilas or Camps, or Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, navy commander in chief at the time of the military coup and a member of the first military junta. Massera was responsible for a naval base in the city of Buenos Aires that was to become infamous as a center for torture—the Navy Petty-Officers School of Mechanics (generally referred to by its Spanish acronym ESMA), only equaled in cruelty and number of victims by the Campo de Mayo army base nineteen miles outside the city. If Vilas, Camps, and Massera believed that the nature of war excludes legal niceties (Vilas himself had intimidated lawyers and judges in the province of Tucumán), Bignone acts "against his will, with the Doctrine and the regulations in his hand."¹³ Death had to be administered, distributed throughout society without mercy, and "mistakes" and "excesses" were inevitable. But these were all in the line of professional duty.

And so these men assumed the role that had been assigned to them: "We will be the executioners," Bignone states in his preface. "They will be remembered as executioners, when they were in fact the saviors. Only history can restore them to their rightful place." Bignone felt compelled to write his version of events for the history books even though he was aware (or so he suggests) of the scandal he would create when he advocated, for example, that Videla should have received the Nobel Peace Prize for the way he ended "a war he had not started."

Hannah Arendt recognized clearly that perpetrators can belong to different personality types.¹⁴ Theodor Adorno went further and identified five types of authoritarian personality.¹⁵ For example, Adorno would have included Ramon J. Camps within a small group of "rebel psychopaths" such as Joseph Goebbels and Julius Streicher because of the way Camps "hated" his victims and took pleasure in his work. However, Arendt was careful to point out that most perpetrators were more like Adolf Eichmann, the spineless bureaucrat who designed the so-called Final Solution to the Jewish Question.

Videla and Bignone were less apathetic than Eichmann, and closer to the manipulative type of obsessive personality identified by Adorno. They were systematic and effective in designing mass murder but never enjoyed slaughter

for its own sake. On the contrary, they felt they had a duty to fulfill. It was an unpleasant obligation, but there was no other alternative than to create a new fatherland by “reorganizing” Argentinean society through genocide. In short, men like Camps and Vilas were the most despicable figures of the Argentinean genocide. But it was men like Videla and Bignone who made genocide possible and controlled the overall process.

The Theory of Two Demons

The triumph of the Radical Civic Union party’s candidate, Raul Alfonsín, in the national elections of 1983 led to a head-on confrontation with the military government’s “self-amnesty” law and its legitimization of genocide. Having gained significant support from human rights organizations, Alfonsín had devoted part of his final election campaign to denouncing an alleged pact between the military and the Peronist trade unions aimed at guaranteeing impunity. Now, Alfonsín questioned the notion that the repression carried out by the military dictatorship could be described as a “war.”

Decrees 157 and 158, drawn up by Alfonsín’s Radical government, expressed a view that soon became widely accepted and that later became known as the theory of the two demons. These decrees ordered the simultaneous prosecution of the leaders of the military juntas during the 1976–1983 dictatorship and the leaders of the armed left-wing organizations such as Montoneros and the ERP. Moreover, Decree 157, directed against the surviving leaders of the armed left, suggested they had started the conflict and the repression was simply a response, albeit an exaggerated one, but a response nonetheless.

These decrees were the first attempt to equate the crimes of victims and perpetrators in order to ensure “symmetrical treatment”—a discursive strategy that was undoubtedly successful and shaped the way events were perceived from the end of military dictatorship until 1996 when, on the twentieth anniversary of the coup of 1976, this version of events started to come under challenge. Certainly, the CONADEP Report “Never Again,” which saw society as a victim of two simultaneous types of aggression, held sway throughout the 1980s. The prologue to the report was written by Ernesto Sabato (24 June 1911–30 April 2011), a prestigious Argentine novelist, painter, and physicist who headed the eleven-member commission. In it Sabato stated that “during the 1970s Argentina was convulsed by a terror that came from both the extreme right and the extreme left.” In other words, there were two symmetrical terrors and a society caught in the middle and unable to escape from either. Sabato goes on to say that “the armed forces responded to the terrorists’ crimes with a terrorism far worse than the one they were combating, and after 24 March 1976 they were able to count on the power and impunity of an absolute state, which they misused to abduct, torture, and kill thousands of human beings.”

The crucial element in Sabato's account is the "victimization" of society as a whole, to which I have already alluded. Society is seen as removed from the battle between these two demonic groups—one of them, as Sabato explains, "infinitely worse" than the other, but both separate from society. Citizens are seen as *passive victims* of external aggression. "External" no longer meant from outside of the country (as when the military claimed that foreigners were responsible for the violence of the early 1970s). Instead, it meant "alienated" from ordinary society and thus relegated to the level of madness and irrationality (therefore "demonic"). By coincidence or by design, this was exactly how Nazism was viewed in the first two decades following the end of World War II.

However, this is not to say that the report of the CONADEP does not point out the systematic violation of human rights implemented by the military regime:

From the huge amount of documentation we have gathered, it can be seen that these human rights were violated at all levels by the Argentine state during the repression carried out by its armed forces. Nor were they violated in a haphazard fashion, but systematically, according to a similar pattern, with identical kidnappings and tortures taking place throughout the country. How can this be viewed as anything but a planned campaign of terror conceived by the military high command? How could all this have been committed by a few depraved individuals acting on their own initiative, when there was an authoritarian military regime, with all the powers and control of information that this implies? How can one speak of *individual excesses*? The information we collected confirms that this diabolical technology was employed by people who may well have been sadists, but who were carrying out orders. . . . Those members of the Argentine military juntas who replied to the universal outcry at the horror by deploring "excesses in the repression which are inevitable in a dirty war," were hypocritically trying to shift the blame for this calculated terror on to the individual actions of less senior officers.¹⁶

Alfonsín's government later returned in its second amnesty law (Law 23.521 Due Obedience Law of 1987) to a distinction between "those who gave the orders, those who executed them, and those who exceeded them"—the so-called doctrine of the three levels first presented during the 1983 election campaign. However, the 1984 CONADEP Report clearly challenged this approach. Instead, it pointed out that kidnapping, torture, and murder had been systematically used across the country as part of a carefully designed plan. So-called excesses formed part of the overall plan.

As for the victims, Sabato began by pointing out that these had come from nearly every walk of life—social, professional, and political. He then went on to

argue in one of the most revealing paragraphs of the report that “the vast majority of them were innocent not only of any acts of terrorism, but even of belonging to the fighting units of the guerrilla organizations: the latter chose to fight it out and either died in shootouts or committed suicide before they could be captured. Few of them were still alive by the time the repressive forces reached them.” This paragraph introduces the idea of the innocence of the victims as opposed to the (tacitly acknowledged) guilt of the “fighting units of the guerrilla organizations.” It makes the unjustified assumption that the guerrillas died fighting while the victims—that is, those people who were taken to detention centers—were all noncombatants, irrespective of their political affiliation or relationship with the armed struggle. In fact, the guerrillas were just as much victims as the people who had no relationship whatsoever to armed or political organizations—although this is not acknowledged in the report.

The hegemonic vision that emerged was one of an “innocent” society caught between two opposing types of violence: left-wing “terrorist” violence (although terrorist is clearly a misnomer),¹⁷ and the repressive state violence carried out mostly by the armed forces.

Elsa Drucaroff has rightly pointed out that the terror described in Sabato’s prologue derived from an “abstract approach to social and historical relations . . . and their replacement by non-human, demonic subjects.”¹⁸ One could argue that this alienation of society as a whole from the genocide in which it was involved and in which everybody participated one way or another—as perpetrators, accomplices, passive bystanders, or victims—was precisely why this vision achieved such a broad consensus. The notion of “collective victimization” soothed the consciences of many Argentines of the period with the thought that everybody (with the exception of left and right “terrorist groups”) had been a victim and so nobody needed to question his or her own role in the genocide.

The idea of two demons jointly responsible for various genocidal social practices was defended most clearly by several intellectuals close to Alfonsín. One of the most representative of these was Pablo Giussani, whose most widely known book was *Montoneros, Armed Arrogance*.¹⁹ Giussani saw state violence as a response to the “stupid terrorism” practiced by armed left-wing groups, of which Montoneros was the most important. According to Giussani, Montoneros believed democracy was really a covert form of fascism and that its attacks would “expose fascism” by forcing the government to resort to repression. In other words, the military had simply responded to a “provocation,” but repression and annihilation had not formed part of any wider social, economic, or political process. Giussani stresses even more than Sabato the idea of a contest between two symmetrical military totalitarianisms, both alien to society. But by describing Montoneros as a “fascist” and a “Nazi” organization, Giussani confuses several very different historical, social, and political processes. Like the adjectives “delusional” and “messianic,” he uses the terms “fascist” or “Nazi”

less to gain understanding than to vilify armed leftist groups in Argentina, and in particular the Peronist Montoneros.

Although Giussani's work is more journalistic than academic, the denigration of this period of Argentina's history as "irrational" together with the indiscriminate application of psychoanalytic concepts to the political arena—concepts such as *dementia*, *delirium*, *messianism*, *arrogance*, *derangement*, *sinister*, *provocative*, *eschatological*—have been a recurrent feature of works by historians and other academics from the 1980s onward. Beyond the range of explanatory frameworks they offer, these works are characterized by their lack of respect for the victims and for the political ideas of the period they study.

Clearly, there is a need for a more careful, political analysis of the actions and defeat of Argentina's armed leftist groups. This may come from surviving members of those organizations, from people of the same generation who knew them, or from a generation too young to have participated directly in the events. But it must necessarily go beyond insults and inappropriate psychoanalytic interpretations, however harsh and unpalatable its conclusions may be.

What is striking about Giussani and his many disciples is that instead of producing a serious political review of armed leftist organizations in Argentina and Latin America, for which there was obviously a legitimate need in the 1980s,²⁰ they turned out a stream of propaganda that not only put those organizations on a par with the perpetrators of genocide but even made them coresponsible for their own deaths and the deaths of others by equating the victims with their murderers. In one of the most revealing paragraphs, which exemplifies the tone of his argument, Giussani says that "from the electoral rolls of the Authentic Party [the political party created by the Montoneros organization to participate in the democratic elections] emerged many of the bodies dumped in ditches and vacant lots by the Triple A, victims of a mass murder that can be only half attributed to that vigilante organization. The other half of the blame must be laid at the door of Montoneros and its cavalier disregard for safety and security."²¹

Certainly, Montoneros committed many political and tactical blunders. For example, after being expelled by Perón from his Justicialist Party in May 1974, Montoneros's leaders took the decision to go underground, waiting until after Perón's death in July 1974 to announce this measure on 6 September 1974. This led to the organization's being declared illegal just over a year later. Another example was the order for over a hundred surviving Montoneros to return from abroad for a "strategic counteroffensive" in 1979—a counteroffensive in which most of them were killed. However, it is one thing to make mistakes and another to be responsible for genocide.²²

A more elaborate version of this approach—written in an academic style, but with similar conclusions—can be found in Claudia Hilb and Daniel Lutzky's *The New Argentine Left: 1960–1980*.²³ As the title suggests, the focus of this book

is on what the authors call the “new” Argentine left, a movement that allegedly emerged in the 1960s and whose defining feature was the role these organizations gave to violence. Like Giussani, Hilb and Lutzky see violence not as a point that has been reached in a social conflict, but as the decision of one of the actors in the conflict (in this case, the “new” left). Indeed, the authors try to explain later events in terms of the climate of violence created by the “new” left—an idea developed by Hugo Vezzetti some twenty years later. Nevertheless, Hilb and Lutzky stop short of blaming the left for genocide as Giussani does. They not only keep the distinction between victims and perpetrators, but also recognize that repression was aimed at all left-wing militants and not just at innocent victims split off from this “new” left.

“Armed Actions” and the Concept of “Civil War”

In the previous section I discussed a number of classic works, all of which appeared in 1984 and were built around the “theory of two demons”: Sábato’s prologue to the *Nunca Más* (Never Again) CONADEP Report, and the works of Giussani and Hilb and Lutzky.²⁴ In contrast, Juan Carlos Marín’s *Armed Actions: Argentina 1973–1976* was first published toward the end of the military dictatorship in 1982.²⁵ Marín’s work, therefore, did not dispute these later interpretations. Instead, it used statistical analyses in an attempt to reinterpret the “armed actions” that had occurred between Perón’s death in 1973 and the military coup in 1976 as part of a “civil war” that supposedly split Argentine society in two.²⁶

Marín set out to understand this “civil war” by dividing “armed actions” into those that caused casualties (dead, wounded, kidnapped) and those that did not. He aimed to show that the casualties caused by the “regime” were far superior to those brought about by protest movements between 1973 and 1976, despite claims to the contrary from the armed forces and the media that supported them. In this way Marín hoped to demonstrate the different nature of the conflicting forces, their different objectives, and particularly their different achievements. As he notes quite early in his book, the armed organizations of the left had already been defeated before the coup of 1976.

It is very important to note that Marín’s approach, unlike the “two demons theory” that was to predominate during the pseudodemocracy of the Alfonsín era, allows for a much better understanding of the victims and perpetrators. The victims are no longer treated as “innocent civilians” but as a social force. This was probably one reason why Marín’s work was virtually ignored by subsequent writers on the subject. But it is also necessary to note that Marín’s approach seriously blurs the boundaries between war and genocide by implying that all armed conflicts—including civil wars—are wars of annihilation involving genocide. Marín fails to recognize that war and genocide involve

different technologies of power, and require different policies and logistics. Moreover, the fact of choosing quantitative measurements of armed events (with or without casualties) as an indicator of strength impoverishes the analysis of changes in the balance of *political* forces throughout the period in question, since these cannot be reduced to simple head counts. Nevertheless, Marín's approach is well reasoned in many respects and is one of the earliest attempts to provide a causal explanation of genocidal social practices in Argentina.

Over the last three decades, Inés Izaguirre has tried to apply some of Marín's concepts to the persecution that took place following the military coup of March 24, 1976. Just as Marx traced the origins of capitalism to earlier economic behavior, Izaguirre sees the armed actions of the 1973–1976 democratic governments as a "primitive accumulation" of capital for the genocide that followed.²⁷ In different works, she also set out to study the class origins and political identity of the victims of genocide and the nature of the conflicts waged during the period before the genocide.

The idea of a "primitive accumulation of genocide" is highly suggestive. However, Marín and Izaguirre do not specifically explore the concept of genocide, from either a legal or a historical-sociological viewpoint. Had they done so, the international literature published over the last thirty years would have surely provided them with a clear understanding of this "primitive accumulation."

I must confess that I am indebted to Marín and Izaguirre for an idea I have developed in previous chapters of this book—namely, that the *purpose* of a genocidal social process is to destroy the broader fabric of social relations. However, if "demonizing" approaches implicitly remove the rest of society from the conflict by treating the "two terrorisms" as a struggle between two alien forces, Marín's and—to a lesser extent—Izaguirre's approaches reduce political conflict to a series of military actions. Both writers prioritize "armed actions" over the "political actions" at a moment in the struggle when the conflict was still defined in political terms—for example, armed groups were isolated *militarily* so that they could not participate in the struggle to build a *political* consensus. As a result, both Marín and Izaguirre miss two essential and interrelated points: first, the specific role of genocidal social practices in destroying earlier social relations; and, second, the ways in which relations between various political forces were transformed between 1973 and 1983. Neither can be deduced from the number of "armed actions" and "casualties," as carried out by Marín, or from an analysis of the professional, political, or economic identity of the victims of the dictatorship, as favored by Izaguirre.

Essentially, what Marín and Izaguirre fail to understand is that whereas in a civil war one social group seeks to *defeat* another social group in order to impose its political or ideological goals, genocide goes much deeper. With genocide, there is an attempt to *reengineer* social relations as a whole. Not only

are the strategy and tactics of genocide different but so, too, are its effects. Moreover, while a war involves two social forces that polarize society along military lines—no matter how unbalanced the opposing armies may be—a genocidal social practice requires only one army, that of the perpetrators.

Later, in an article published in 2001,²⁸ Marín attempted to understand the “reconciliation” between Argentina’s genocidal society and the perpetrators of the genocide. To do so, he focused on the Catholic Church as a creator of identities for the victims, the perpetrators, and society as a whole. We will return to the key role played by the Catholic Church in indoctrinating and supporting the perpetrators in a later chapter. Here, it is important to point out that in Marín’s view, the Church blocked personal autonomy in the population at large not by encouraging betrayal but by treating people as children, as the medieval Church had done. Now, betrayal, as I have argued, leads to the moral destruction of the population, which, far from remaining immature, understands only too well the degradation to which it has sunk as moral accomplices in the murder and disappearance of fellow citizens. Such people are not, in my view, “childish” adults incapable of comprehending the meaning of their actions—from which they would thus be “alienated.” On the contrary, Zygmunt Bauman uses the term *adiaphorization*—a term coined by Church councils in the Middle Ages—to refer to the tendency to trim and cut down the category of acts amenable to moral judgment, to obscure or deny the ethical relevance of certain categories of action, and to refuse the ethical prerogatives of certain targets of action. *Adiaphorized* adults are unable to confront the past because their moral sense is numbed through betrayal and complicity. Instead, they “disown” and block out the past with the logic of two demons.²⁹

Unfortunately, Marín devotes less space in his article to the “construction of the perpetrators,” a series of truly insightful suggestions that are left curtailed as a guide for future work.

The “Terrorist State”

Eduardo Luis Duhalde’s book *The Terrorist Argentine State* (1983) came out at almost the same time as Marín’s and so it escaped the need to pander to Alfonsín’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” democratist policy.³⁰ Duhalde makes no bones about describing the events as “genocide,” a term he continued to use as a member of the Argentine Commission on Human Rights (known in Argentina by its Spanish acronym CADHU), an organization of Argentine exiles living in Europe who were quick to denounce the crimes of the military dictatorship.

The commission’s documents for 1977 were labeled “Argentina, Genocide on Trial,” and it was from these that Duhalde took the title for his book published in Spain the same year. This is at odds with the limited use made of the concept of “genocide” during the 1980s, and it is the first use of the term to

cover annihilation by the military in Argentina, at least in the documents I have been able to access.

Duhalde's book, however, privileges the notion of the terrorist state, which forms part of its title. Duhalde presents a remarkably clear analysis of the patterns of state domination and how these relate to the central role played by repression and state terrorism in shaping events during the National Reorganization Process. In this sense, his work is highly suggestive, and his ideas on the role of secrecy, the functions of terror, and the difference between "emergency measures" and a "state of emergency"—a distinction later developed by Giorgio Agamben—turn Duhalde's book into an indispensable read.

One of Duhalde's most fertile ideas is that, unlike other types of dictatorship, the terrorist state does not seek to militarize society, but to dismember it. From here it is a short step to arguing that the aim of genocide is to destroy and rebuild the social fabric. Indeed, Duhalde sometimes suggests this, as when he points out that the terrorist state encourages individualism, the breaking of solidarity, and betrayal—although he does not pursue these ideas any further.

In the 1999 edition of the *Terrorist Argentine State*, Duhalde discusses other works published during the fifteen years since the book's first edition. Some of the issues he tackles, such as the political and symbolic consequences of impunity, will be discussed in chapter 8. However, it is worth examining his discussion of whether the term "war" is appropriate to describe the events of 1976–1983. This discussion includes both the perpetrators' ideas on the subject and Marín's analysis of the term "civil war."

Duhalde points out that the concept of war is problematic in the context we are considering because of the way it equates victims with perpetrators. In his view, the fact that the guerrilla forces were incapable of beating the security forces at any moment during the conflict makes it impossible to speak of a real war, regardless of whether those who participated in the conflict did so or not. The difference is that one side was made up of a small portion of society while the other side (both under Isabel Perón's government and under the military dictatorship) controlled the state apparatus and had a virtual monopoly on violence throughout the country except very briefly in parts of Tucumán province. As Duhalde himself says: "There is no war between a fraction of society and the military apparatus of the state. On the contrary, this is what ends up making the conflict a non-war and turning it into a mere repressive policy on the part of the state."³¹

This is what distinguishes Argentina's so-called Dirty War from the Spanish Civil War and even the civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador, where the military situation for the insurgents was grim but not hopeless. Duhalde claims that "there can be no civil war unless both sides polarize the society militarily. In other words, this occurs when the stage of social struggle has become the theater of war."³² Nevertheless, Duhalde points out that the facts under study

form a “socio-political conflict” and not a “demonic metaphysical dispute.” In other words, the term “terrorist state” does not depoliticize the conflict, but rather helps us understand the difference between social confrontation and war.

On the other hand, “terrorist state” is undoubtedly a source of confusion. The blending together of genocide and terrorism in the concept of “state terrorism” has led to countless misunderstandings and distortions. Just as the text of the 1948 Genocide Convention and much Holocaust literature ended up “depoliticizing” the concept of genocide, Duhalde’s terrorist state has followed a similar path. Worse still, several reinterpretations of Duhalde’s work have been based precisely on the ambiguous and versatile concept of “terrorism,” especially from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries onward.

Although Duhalde draws attention in both editions of his book to the political nature of the conflict and the aptness of the term “genocide” to define it, the concept of the terrorist state was hijacked by the discourse of the Alfonsín era describing the surgical interventions of one demon—embodied by the military state—against another demon that challenged it. In this discourse, “state terrorism” became the counterpart of “left-wing terrorism.” Duhalde does not share this approach; but because the military also described the guerrillas as terrorists, his views later came to be misinterpreted.³³

Duhalde’s work has also been misinterpreted because it contains several inconsistencies, such as when he attempts to distinguish between those people who were supposedly “primary targets” of the terrorist state and those who were “innocent victims,” a distinction that seems more in line with the “democratist” approach of demonization. One paragraph in which this confusion can be seen clearly is when Duhalde says that young adolescents “were not in hiding, they went about normally, maintained normal relationships in the family, at work or in the educational institutions they attended. What danger for the terrorist state could these youngsters pose? They were little more than children, just awakening to life”³⁴

Pilar Calveiro, one of Duhalde’s harshest critics in this respect,³⁵ claims that focusing on “innocent” victims in this way both depoliticizes events and indirectly justifies state terrorism against the “not so innocent.” In my view, Duhalde is far from doing this. However, later uses of his term “terrorist state” make it all too obvious that either Duhalde did not express his ideas clearly enough in some places, or that the unfortunate title he gave to his book, together with the political needs of the period, triumphed over his generally profound and coherent analysis.

Marín’s theory of “civil war” met with a wall of silence. In contrast, Duhalde’s approach was emptied of its critical content and watered down into an analysis of the repressive techniques of the military who usurped constitutional power. Thus the concept of terrorist state was used to legitimize theories

that focused on acts of violence rather than political struggle, replicating yet again—in one form or another—the theory of the two demons.

Whether muted or distorted and depoliticized, these early approaches could not avoid mirroring the alienation of those attempting to distance themselves from recent trauma. Disturbing events were assigned to the category of the irrational, insane, and diabolically metaphysical, as happened after the Second World War in works about the Nazi genocides until the inadequacy of such an approach was exposed by Hilberg and Arendt in the early 1960s.

This similarity in the ways the two historical processes have been depicted will be analyzed in more detail in chapter 8. Suffice it to say for now that in both cases, the predominant image during the fifteen years after both genocides was one of a break in the historical continuity of the societies in which they occurred. Genocide was removed from the society in which it had taken place, thus avoiding the unpleasant question of where everyone was while it was happening.

The Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State and the Concept of “Micro-Despotism”

Like Marín and Duhalde, the Argentine political scientist Guillermo O’Donnell was also writing during the years of military dictatorship and in the two years or so between the return to democracy and the “Trial of the Juntas,” in which General Videla, the first military president, and Admiral Massera, the naval commander mentioned earlier, were found guilty of murder and other crimes by a civilian court and sentenced to life imprisonment. O’Donnell later published several of his articles in his book *Counterpoints*.³⁶ They synthesize the two broad perspectives that O’Donnell uses to understand the phenomenon: the macro view—mainly linked to the specific characteristics of the bureaucratic authoritarian state in the period under review—and the micro view (more suggestive to my mind), which emphasizes what he calls “the unleashing of micro-despotism.”

Although O’Donnell’s basic macro view concept is that of the bureaucratic authoritarian state, the specific forms that this state took and the peculiar way in which class alliances were formed are analyzed with extraordinary insight. O’Donnell believes that in the months immediately after the military coup of 1976, the bureaucratic authoritarian state aimed to get rid of political interlocutors who were loosening the grip of transnational capital and the landed bourgeoisie in power in Argentina—interlocutors primarily embodied in the Peronist movement.

This macro-level need was matched at the micro level by a complementary need to destroy the principle of egalitarianism—more symbolic than real—which Peronism had instilled into society. O’Donnell explores this development in great depth in his article “And Why the Fuck Should I Care? Notes on

Sociability and Politics in Argentina and Brazil,”³⁷ whose title begins with a popular provocation challenging class rule in Argentina. According to O’Donnell, the political establishment tried to dislodge the notion of egalitarianism by spreading terror throughout society and installing tacit approval for “micro-despotism” by getting all those would-be Argentine authority figures in schools and factories, in the public administration, in the street and in the home to vent their latent tyranny on their subordinates—students, workers, employees, passers-by, or children—as a way of disciplining society in myriad ways.

Both these views—the macro and the micro—are compatible with other perspectives, but they fail to coalesce into a general explanation of the events of the period. O’Donnell is respectful of the victims: he avoids the issue of naming (war or repression, social forces or guerrilla forces), but he does not resort to the Manichaeian oversimplification of the two demons, or to denigrating the victims as so many others have done. He does not even confuse the roles of perpetrators and victims, as was usual in the years immediately after the events.

It is striking that Guillermo O’Donnell’s work has not achieved the same recognition in Argentina as abroad, especially as he was president of the International Political Science Association from 1988 to 1991 and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1995 until his death in 2011. At the very least, the republishing of *Counterpoints* in English in 1999 should have led scholars in his home country to question the hegemonic explanation of the “demonic groups” that supposedly attacked a defenseless society.

Representation and Subjectivity

León Rozitchner wrote several articles before, during, and after Argentina’s 1976–1983 dictatorship on the subject of what to call such annihilation processes, and the consequences of naming on the way we subjectively interpret events. However, Rozitchner’s approach is indirect and he makes hardly any categorical statements.³⁸

Nevertheless, while he does not set out to consider events from a broader perspective—events he describes as genocide in his various writings—Rozitchner does suggest ideas that are relevant to both this and the next two chapters. On the one hand, he reformulates the categories of conflict. Reinterpreting Carl von Clausewitz’s theory of war, Rozitchner suggests that, from early on, guerrilla forces in Argentina neglected the importance of subjective interpretations of events and forgot that the true strength of counterhegemonic groups lies in defensive actions, where they can score propaganda points with public opinion, not in military actions, where they are always overwhelmed by the forces of the state.³⁹

Rozitchner’s very sound and detailed work demystified the conditions surrounding the “new politics” of the 1980s. This was a politics legitimized and at

the same time held in check (like all political power) by the military. More to the point, Rozitchner refused to use the term “war” to describe the genocidal actions of the Argentine military in the 1970s, stating that one cannot “call that type of violence” war. With impunity, they called it a “Dirty War.” This was quite simply a terror campaign against an unarmed “enemy within.”⁴⁰

Examining in depth the political and military establishment’s strategic objective of “reorganizing” society, Rozitchner interprets institutionalized terror as a sort of “final solution” for rebellion. Like Roberto Jacoby, Rozitchner notes that killing gives those in power a kind of added value, terrorizing everybody else into seeing themselves and those around them as powerless.⁴¹

Finally, another important factor that Rozitchner analyzes is the discourses of intellectuals during and after the genocide. In particular, he shows how “democratist” discourse apparently attempts to deceive the political and military establishment in a manner similar to that employed by Scheherazade, the storyteller in the *Thousand and One Nights*, who kept death at bay by telling the king a different story each night. In this profound questioning of the role of the new “democracy,” which we saw in Giussani as well as Hilb and Lutzky and which we will find again in Vezzetti and also in Palermo and Novaro, Rozitchner suggests that

[h]ere, in this lower world, where God is not an Argentine and we are not immortal, not even goodwill is enough. And they know it. It is dangerous for the left to think like Scheherazade and try to seduce the despot by telling him a never-ending story: that of our own impotence. Could it be that we have supplanted the trembling stories of our thousand and one nights with our “scientific” and “theoretical” inventions? Scheherazade’s only power was her woman’s body, her seductive hysteria, and her tongue. Will we continue telling each other stories to postpone the inevitable arrival of death?⁴²

The Version of the Survivors

Apart from the authors already discussed, attempts to go beyond the theory of the two demons were confined to very small groups, and their advocates were ridiculed or ignored in public debates until the mid-1990s. Significantly, one of the voices most systematically denied was that of the survivors. As in the case of the Nazi genocides, the reflections of the survivors were carried out in private. In public, their testimony and interpretations were questioned—if not ignored outright—and a campaign was mounted to discredit them by branding them as informers, traitors, or accomplices, a campaign that exploited the confusion of perpetrators with victims, already discussed in chapter 6 in connection with transference of guilt.

Like the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, survivors of Argentine detention centers were also blamed for having “come out alive from hell.” If the families of the victims were able to tell their stories publicly, the ex-detainees were denied this possibility. Instead, their accounts were discredited as being “highly subjective.” The testimony of their sufferings was heard in court to achieve the conviction of the perpetrators and then, aggressively if need be, it was switched off again like a tape recording.⁴³ Only the testimony of what the authorities had done to their bodies could be heard. Any reference to their identity, their past, any questioning of the accepted truths of the period, and, of course, any comment that could question the victims’ status as “angels” was disqualified on the grounds that the “survivors” did not have the same moral authority to judge as the “victims” who had not survived—not even to reflect on what had happened to them and its consequences.

Despite all this, the survivors tried to construct their own understanding of events: at first alone, then in small groups which would come to the fore when the hegemonic version of events started to come under fire. The more organized collective attempts to express alternative conceptions of the past were two seminars held in 1996 and 1997 by the Human Rights Freedom Chair at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Buenos Aires and led by the founder of the department, Osvaldo Bayer. There, the survivors were able to challenge society in a public arena—the University of Buenos Aires—with their own reflections on the period in question. Some of the issues that were raised at these seminars have profoundly influenced my own thinking and will be discussed in later chapters.

Among the writings of the survivors, those of Pilar Calveiro are especially interesting. Her most significant book was published in 1998, and it is the only work written by a survivor to have sold relatively well before the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁴⁴ Following in the footsteps of Holocaust survivors like Bruno Bettelheim and Primo Levi, Calveiro sets out to investigate, through the eyes of a former detainee and missing person, the nature of concentration camp power in Argentina, an issue that had been absent from previous works except for some brief passages in the final chapters of Duhalde’s *The Terrorist Argentine State*.

Although the thrust of Calveiro’s work is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the policies developed during the dictatorship, she does in fact carry out a preliminary exploratory analysis. In her work, the concentration camp system plays a key role not because of her own suffering but because, as she says, “concentration camps were the operating theaters where surgery took place [meaning the surgery needed to produce another country]—it is no coincidence that operating theater was the name given to torture chambers. They were also, no doubt, the testing ground for a new society: orderly, controlled, and terrified.”⁴⁵

According to Calveiro, a key factor operating during the 1970s is what she calls binary logic. Binary logic explains how the military and also most of their opponents, particularly the armed left-wing organizations, perceived conflict

and the path they chose to resolve it: polarizing the conflict into a “war” in which there could be only “friends” and “enemies.” Here is what Calveiro has to say about this:

In the military’s view, Argentina was at war, a war against subversion being waged inside and outside national borders. The military were quick to declare it and the guerrillas took up the gauntlet. Both groups spoke of war. For the military, thinking about matters in terms of war put them in a “professional” situation, removing them from the purely repressive functions historically reserved for the police, while feeding this binary view of friends and enemies. . . . For their part, the guerrillas preferred to be represented as a guerrilla army that defied another army to being seen as a small force of insurrection, with some ability to commit violence. . . . They chose to show themselves as an army at war to increase their importance and apparent dangerousness. In this sense, they incited the military to think as they did and consciously helped to spread the fiction of a popular war against an imperialist army.⁴⁶

Later she adds:

Concentration camps were the apparatus designed to carry out the policy of extermination, the product of this binary conception of the political and social. . . . The concentration-extermination camps were set up to disappear a whole spectrum of political, social and trade union militants that prevented the hegemonic consolidation of power. The main target of this method of repression was the guerrillas, but also included the vast spectrum of so-called subversion which has already been discussed. Although the notion of subversive was sufficiently broad to include almost anyone, its use was intended to facilitate a well-defined persecution: that of radical militants and all their points of support.⁴⁷

The importance of Calveiro’s work is that, unlike the “democratist” approaches, she does not lose sight of the political nature of the conflict and the victims. At the same time, she does not make the mistake—as the armed organizations that participated in the conflict tend to do—of categorizing it in binary terms as a civil war or revolutionary war.

Although she never uses the concept of genocide in her work, Calveiro’s emphasis on concentration camps as a metaphor for the broader process of social repression of which they were a part suggests that what the military called the “National Reorganization Process” was indeed an ambitious plan in which concentration camps were only a starting point for much deeper social transformations. The book concludes with a paragraph inviting the reader to think about the sort of society terror produces: “An interesting exercise would be to understand how the power to disappear people is recycled. What are its

break-ups and amnesias in this postmodern era? How does it repress and totalize, even when it manifests itself in the most radical individualism? What are its schizophrenias, and how does it feed on the false separation between the individual and the social? How can we preserve memory, find the loopholes in the system and survive it?"⁴⁸

Written along similar lines, Carlos Flaskamp's retrospective account of the period also critically examines the concept of war.⁴⁹ Recognizing that he himself had thought in terms of "war" while he was a senior commander of the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces, Flaskamp now believes that "the subjective convictions of the actors are not decisive to settle this issue [the existence of a war]." ⁵⁰ Flaskamp questions his earlier use of the term "war" on three different grounds.

First, there was no revolutionary army: "To speak of war, I must recognize the existence of two armies confronting each other. Both the ERP and Montoneros formed armed groups, but never became true armies."⁵¹

Second, the revolutionaries controlled no territory: The single and very temporary exception was the ERP Mountain Company. The ERP operated in the province of Tucumán. The armed revolutionary organizations did not control land areas, they were not part of military units, and they did not disperse after every action.⁵²

Finally, Flaskamp suggests that, aside the perceptions of soldiers and revolutionary militants, the vast majority of the Argentine people was not at war. It suffered the consequences of Argentina's oligarchic economic policies as well as the political repression of the trade unions. The public did not at all take part in military actions nor did they feel represented by the military.⁵³

Luis Mattini asks similar questions although the answers he gives are more nuanced.⁵⁴ Unlike Calveiro, Flaskamp, or the members of the Association of Ex-Detained Disappeared (AEDD), Mattini was not a survivor of a secret detention center; and, as a senior officer of the ERP, he played a leading role in the events. Nevertheless, his ideas have a lot in common with those of Calveiro or Flaskamp. Unlike the "democratist" writers mentioned earlier, Mattini does not exclude the term "war" from the very beginning. Instead, he uses the concept of war to explore the distinctiveness of the actions carried out by the terrorist state in Argentina. In his article "Was There a War in Argentina?" (1999), Mattini argues that the conflict was unlike any other war—national, civil, or revolutionary—until then and also unlike any sort of classical political repression. But the main objective in this article is to make visible the political nature of the confrontation in Argentina. As Mattini states halfway through the article, "if this is not war, let us seek the right word, but it is not simple repression, however cruel, nor simple repressive excesses. It is a category of domination characteristic of this century and which corresponds to a certain type of civilization, to the extreme variant of anonymous bureaucratic domination."⁵⁵

Despite some confusion about the nature of Nazism (which he equates, mistakenly, with Franco's dictatorship and the repression of the Communards in Paris), Mattini seeks to draw a distinction between previous acts of war or repression and Argentina's genocidal war with its clandestine operations controlled by the government's intelligence apparatus. Without giving a definitive answer, the article characterizes the period 1956–1976 as one of “latent civil war,” clarifying that in late 1974 Operation Independence initiated a new form of action, which would be extended to the rest of the country in the second half of 1975. Mattini could not find a precise name for this phenomenon. I believe that the concept of genocidal social practice, which differs both from various forms of war and from classical models of political repression, is the best suited to describing the specific nature of the conflict that Mattini recognized so clearly.

Using the Concept of Genocide to Write History

As mentioned earlier, it was not until the mid-1990s that academic works started to question the democratist approach. Gradually, scholarly publications began to promote a more complex and nuanced approach, one that drew on the silenced visions of Marín, Duhalde, O'Donnell, and Rozitchner and the hitherto disparaged voices of the survivors. The two short chapters Luis Alberto Romero devotes to the subject in his *Brief Contemporary History of Argentina* (1994) are now recognized as a turning point in historical thinking on the Argentine genocide.⁵⁶

Although this work covers a period of more than a century, Romero takes remarkable care in narrating the events that occurred during the dictatorship, dispensing with adjectives that might suggest madness or the demonic, so common in previous works. He is also the first published writer to apply the concept of genocide to the period in question—and it is precisely this aspect of his work that has been most criticized by other historians. (I have outlined this debate in chapter 1 of this book, so there is no need to expand on it here.) Unfortunately, their criticisms have been so persistent that in his later works Romero recants on his use of the term genocide and “corrects” his “mistake” by explaining it as a “legacy of the period.”⁵⁷

In *A Brief Contemporary History* Romero turned away from the logic of the two extremisms, noting that “the proposal of the military . . . was to root out the problem which, according to their diagnosis, lay in society itself and the unresolved nature of its conflicts. The nature of the solution could be guessed from the metaphors used—disease, tumor removal, major surgery.”⁵⁸

He also rightly points out that genocide begins with Operation Independence in Tucumán in December 1974—and not with the 1976 coup—and that this political use of the concept of genocide, far from seeking to place the victims outside the political arena, restores the political content to the whole

genocidal process and moves away from visions of both angelic innocence and war between rival groups. As Romero remarks,

Beyond errors and accidents, the victims were the intended ones. Arguing the need to confront and destroy armed organizations on their own ground, the operation sought to eliminate all activism, all social protest—even a modest complaint about a school report card—any expression of critical thinking, any possible political leadership of the popular movement that had developed since the middle of the previous decade and was then destroyed. In that sense the results were exactly the ones intended.⁵⁹

It is remarkable that few historians have developed Romero's brief but well-founded and interesting account even though it was published nearly twenty years ago. On the contrary, the few academic works that have appeared since then revive the model generally accepted in the 1980s, which condemns "irrational terrorism" on both sides and also condemns the trivialization of the repression as an (at most, exaggerated) extension of the struggle between two forms of terrorism. It is also worth noting that Romero himself later subscribed to this perspective, abandoning many of his own perceptions about the phenomenon in favor of a supposed "historical knowledge" that would make his own personal memory appear to be too "subjective" and shaped by the "spirit of the time."⁶⁰

However, not all historians share the same approach. The most significant exception, in my view, is Gabriela Aguila, who has documented and analyzed the genocidal process in the city of Rosario. Aguila is also interested in the links between history and memory and the feasibility of working with recent history as "genocide," particularly as regards the roles of perpetrators and victims. Her incisive questioning of the part played by certain political figures and the media in the city of Rosario has been a constant theme of her work, and suggests promising lines of research at the national level. Her painstaking approach avoids facile statements about the "collective responsibility" of society and concentrates instead on the difficult but necessary task of defining individual criminal, political, and/or moral responsibility for genocide.⁶¹

The "Counterinsurgency War"

In 1999 Ariel Armony wrote a book about the role of the Argentine repressors in what he calls the "anti-Communist crusade in Central America" between 1977 and 1984.⁶² Armony's focus is different from mine, but his book contains a number of ideas that are relevant to this critical survey.

Armony interprets the events of 1976–1983 as part of a "counterinsurgency war," thus linking them to the national liberation struggles in Algeria and

Vietnam and a hitherto little-explored line of thought. In Armony's view, counterinsurgency warfare cannot be equated with either a classic "civil war" or a struggle between rival groups. Nor is it state repression in the usual sense of the term. Rather, it is a new way of dealing with social conflicts that draws on colonial experiences of repressing national liberation movements in different parts of the underdeveloped world.

Armony's approach emphasizes two new elements, although one of these was already mentioned by Duhalde. The first is the importance of intelligence in planning and executing the process of repression and extermination. Duhalde had already drawn attention to this point, but Armony is much more specific, taking advantage of research done in the intervening decade and a half since Duhalde's book appeared, and the opening of various archives, especially those located outside Argentina.

The second is the role that "terror" played in transforming the fabric of social relations, an idea already suggested by O'Donnell and Juan Corradi. Armony takes Duhalde's concept of the terrorist state to analyze the role of the intelligence agencies in perpetrating terror. Although he provides little more than an introduction to a little-treated subject, his bold and original hypotheses about the role played by Argentina's intelligence services in Central America open up new avenues for research.

Nevertheless, we should be careful not to exaggerate the analogy between counterinsurgency war in the context of a struggle for national liberation and events in Argentina. As I have already pointed out in earlier chapters, postcolonial genocide and reorganizing genocide pursue very different social goals.

The similarity between the tactics developed in Algeria and Vietnam and those employed in Argentina is obvious and worth mentioning. However, here the similarities end. Treating these cases as equivalent may increase the risk of confusing a war of liberation against a foreign army of occupation with a conflict taking place at the national level, where the military behave like an "army of occupation" in their own country. In the case of Argentina, the armed forces formed part of a larger social force made up of what O'Donnell identified as the most concentrated sector of the national bourgeoisie in alliance with sectors of the transnational bourgeoisie, a far cry from military occupation by a colonial power.

Finally, Armony continues the debate about whether the nature of the conflict (in which there were almost no battles) warrants the use of the term "war," even with a qualifying term such as "counterinsurgency."

Toward a New "Reification of Violence"?

The term "reification of violence" can refer to a way of thinking that sees violence either in terms of its effects (e.g., number of "armed actions,"

casualties, etc.) as in Marín, or as an almost supernatural force that overwhelms both victims and perpetrators, as in the theory of the two demons. As Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski have pointed out, “in this metamorphosis of effect into cause, violence is transfigured into an entity, an autonomous agent that disrupts order and stands against society, an asocial force beyond the normal and the normative.”⁶³

Shortly after the turn of the millennium, a fresh outpouring of publications appeared analyzing the experience of the dictatorship in Argentina. Hugo Vezzetti, who had published articles on the subject during the 1990s, was one of the clearest exponents of the new line of analysis proposed by these authors.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, although he offers some penetrating insights, Vezzetti’s idea of state terrorism excludes not only the notion of war but also that of genocide in defining events.⁶⁵

Although Vezzetti’s intention is to distance himself from the “two demons” approach, his descriptions of rival social forces in fact have the contrary effect. The victims are disparaged with adjectives such as *scatological*, *grotesque*, *sinister*, *deranged*, *messianic*, among others, which Vezzetti not only applies to Montoneros, as Giussani did, but also to the armed left as a whole. Similarly, Vezzetti’s persistent use of terms such as “terrorists” and “extremists” is linked to the idea of a feud between two opposing terrorist groups who, in Vezzetti’s view, had “reciprocal extermination purposes.” In this sense, he makes the worst possible use of the concept of the terrorist state.⁶⁶

At the heart of Vezzetti’s work lies a conception of “social violence” as the root of all evil—a conception that blurs (even more powerfully than Sabato does in his preface to the CONADEP Report) the difference between victims and perpetrators. This can be seen, for example, when he argues that

even admitting that the responsibilities are not equivalent, what place was left for the role played by guerrilla terrorism that undoubtedly contributed to creating conditions favorable to the [military’s] criminal enterprise and that for most of the years of dictatorship even helped it to gain widespread acceptance in society? Here, a different way of considering this figure of “two demons” emerges that must be considered in light of what has been said about representations of war in society. No exercise of memory can fail to consider the role of radical groups on the stage of indiscriminate violence and institutional chaos that provided the best excuse for the emergence of the dictatorship.⁶⁷

However, despite its limitations, Vezzetti’s book also provides a number of important insights. One of these is his approach to the problem of guilt using the perspective of Karl Jaspers—an approach to which I will return in chapter 10. Other insights include his repeated warnings about the depoliticized discourse of the Alfonsín era with regard to state repression, and his incisive criticisms of

Inés Dussel's and Silvia Finocchio's attempts to normalize and depoliticize a generation of young people by lumping together the different organizations in which they were militants.⁶⁸

A similar perspective to that of Vezzetti is to be found in Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo's lengthy volume, *The Military Dictatorship 1976–1983*.⁶⁹ Again, the adjectives used to describe the armed leftist organizations stereotype their members as insane (“delusional,” “exalted,” and “immersed in a world of illusions”) and terrorists. Not only that: they also claim that “depoliticization” was not a consequence but a cause of the killing. In a new interpretation of events, Novaro and Palermo speak—just as the perpetrators had done—of a “war against subversion” that supposedly targeted society as a whole as a way to dismember the guerrilla organizations. Unlike most of the authors mentioned so far, Novaro and Palermo see the military's operations against society as a derivative of their aim to dismantle the guerrillas. Similarly, those employers and politicians who joined the fight against subversion did so because they were “terrified” by the attacks of Montoneros rather than because they themselves played a fundamental part in the repression.⁷⁰

The concept of genocide is also dismissed in a footnote recalling the classic distinction between “being” and “doing”—a distinction between “completely innocent” victims such as the Jews, who were supposedly murdered by the Nazis for what they were, and those “guilty” (or at least “not so innocent”) victims who are murdered for what they do or think. Of course, this distinction glosses over the features of Central European Jewry mentioned earlier, as well as the fact that the other victims of Nazism, such as political dissidents, do not fit neatly into this categorization. By adding the category of innocence to an already questionable distinction between existence, consciousness, and social practice, Novaro and Palermo stake out an unusual territory in the field of human rights by accepting the perpetrators' way of characterizing events (perhaps influenced by the sources they analyze).

Nevertheless, apart from the unusual and highly questionable approach I have just mentioned, the book has some notable successes, such as its analysis of the ambiguity intrinsic in the concept of “subversive crime,” which will be discussed in the next chapter, or the way it distinguishes two symbolic territories, one where people can sleep safely in their beds and another where people cringe in terror. Especially interesting is the way Novaro and Palermo identify the role of the press and other print media in monitoring and denouncing “subversion.” To this end, they conducted a comprehensive and revealing survey of industry publications, popular magazines like *Gente* (People) or *Para Ti* (For You), and circulars from the Argentine Ministry of Education. These points, however, seem strangely out of place in an overall approach that is closer to the

democratist position and even to the documents published by the perpetrators in 1983, discussed earlier in this chapter.

Connecting Loose Ends: Dangers and Opportunities

I wish to close this chapter with some reflections on the many different approaches analyzed here. Classifications and descriptions of events have undergone significant changes over the past two decades that need to be identified. The question is not so much whether certain characterizations are true or false, but the way in which they are accepted and their effects on the construction of a collective memory.

On the one hand, opinions are strongly divided over the existence—or otherwise—of a war, although supporters of both positions disagree among themselves over details. What the perpetrators called a “Dirty War” or “war against subversion” (a term also adopted, surprisingly, by Novaro and Palermo), Marín and Izaguirre describe as a “civil war,” Mattini as a “latent civil war,” and Armony as “counterinsurgency warfare.” Conversely, the democratists (Sabato, Giussani, Hilb and Lutzky, and even Vezzetti) as well as Duhalde, Calveiro, O’Donnell, Rozitchner, Flaskamp, and Romero, all distance themselves, more or less convincingly, from the concept of war.

Clearly, then, the debate involves not only the question of whether or not the conflict of 1974–1983 amounted to a war, but the role played by the concept of war in describing the conflict and the conflicting forces. And this brings us to a second question which, I believe, is more important from the conceptual point of view: the extent to which the conflicting forces were really balanced determines the extent to which both sides can be considered victims and perpetrators.

In the eyes of the perpetrators, the concept of victim was inappropriate since both sides were fighting a war. There were victims and perpetrators on both sides. Thus, approaches that promote the concept of war risk endorsing a similar logic by characterizing the victims as part of a social group “at war” with another social group. In contrast, the democratists sought to split the left-wing social group into one set of innocent victims (society) and another set of “guilty victims,” in some cases, along the lines of the perpetrators’ own version of events.

O’Donnell, Romero, Calveiro, and, to some extent, Duhalde draw a clearer distinction between victims and perpetrators, without depoliticizing the former. Labor union activists, together with student militants and armed militants of leftist organizations, form an indivisible whole in terms of politics and as victims. Their status as victims does not depend on their greater or lesser involvement in armed struggle. That is why this group should not be confused with an army or a side in a war but should be seen as a group of people scheduled by the

perpetrators for extermination, whether or not they already belonged to a real social group.

It is here that the richness of the concept of genocide opens up the greatest possibilities for understanding. Because, whether or not there was a war, the concept of genocide makes a clear distinction between the victim group and the perpetrator group—a distinction that we should not lose sight of if we are to confront the “symbolic enactment” of genocidal social practices that follows physical annihilation of the victims.