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Genocide as Social Practice

Daniel Feierstein, Douglas Andrew Town, Alexander Laban Hinton
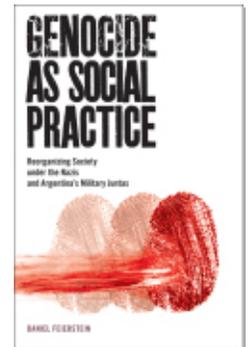
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Toward a Periodization of Genocide in Argentina

One day there came a wind, a sweeping wind. It took our people and left us without love.

–Eight-year-old Argentinean girl, 1982[1]

One of the central arguments of this book is that genocidal social practices have underpinned the exercise of power in the modern period. This chapter suggests how the periodization of genocidal social practices developed in previous chapters can be applied in the case of Argentina, as well as pointing out the main similarities and differences between Argentina's military repression and genocidal processes elsewhere.[2]

Building a Negative Otherness in Argentina: The Figure of the "Subversive Criminal"

If we remember that the first stage of genocide is constructing a "negative Other," the central question in each case must be: What exactly was the model of Otherness, and how did it function? In the case of the Nazi genocides, any answer to these questions is necessarily complex since it must account for a wide range of groups with different identities. However, a tentative hypothesis is that the Nazis began by persecuting *anyone* who showed autonomy in any field whatsoever, and only later (about 1938) turned the figure of the Jewish-Bolshevik into a symbiotic union of ethnic and political Otherness, increasingly linked to an ethnicization of politics in which Jewish "racial degeneration" was essentialized as "irreversible."

In Argentina, both the media in the years before the 1976 coup and the political sectors that supported the dictatorship as well as the members of the military juntas themselves focused on a figure that—while not exactly the same in every instance—was clearly defined as a "subversive criminal." At first, "subversion" alone was enough (sometimes related to Peronism, other times to

Marxism, or to any form of rebelliousness). Redefining the problem as one of criminal behavior was the stratagem used to turn a political conflict into one of law and order and was in line with the French counterinsurgency doctrine in Indochina and Algeria.

Interestingly, contemporary news stories and official statements always defined this Otherness in political and moral terms—despite later attempts from different perspectives to understand and/or explain the Argentine genocide in military terms. Thus, the moral dimension transferred the conflict to the field of ethical standards, generally accepted morality, or the family. "Subversion" or "subversive crime" ended up becoming a *clear* definition (any questioning or criticism of the existing order, at whatever level, was criminalized) and also an *ambiguous* one (practically any thought, social practice, or way of relating with peers could potentially be seen as critical or rebellious).[3]

Let us look at some examples of these definitions. Roberto Eduardo Viola, de facto president between 29 March and 11 December 1981, and previously commander in chief of the army under the military junta led by General Jorge Rafael Videla, said that "subversion is any open or secret action, insidious or violent, seeking to alter or destroy moral standards and the way of life of a people, in order to take power and impose a new way of life based on a different scale of values. It is essentially a form of political-ideological reaction directed at undermining the existing political and administrative order and is based on exploiting dissatisfaction, real or imaginary, with the political, social or economic order."[4]

In another much quoted phrase, Videla, the de facto president from 1976 to 1981, also defined the enemy: "A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but anyone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western Christian civilization."[5] That is, both in perpetrators' statements and in practice, repression in Argentina was a political struggle that went beyond ideological disagreement and sought to impose a particular model of society through terror and death. Thus, any attempt at self-reliance and self-sufficiency—whether promoted by a political party or by ordinary people with no political awareness at all—was repressed, and the population was homogenized into a hierarchically organized society with an authoritarian ideology, religion, and culture that the perpetrators called "Western Christianity."

This discourse with its religious overtones was fervently supported from the Catholic pulpits in Argentina, with sermons calling on the military to engage in a "holy war," as can be seen in the following homily delivered before General Viola by the military vicar and general provicar of the Argentine Armed Forces, Vitorio Bonamin, on 23 September 1975: "I salute all the men of the Armed Forces who have come here to the Jordan of Blood to cleanse themselves and take the lead of the entire country. The army is expiating the impurities of our country. Wouldn't Christ want the Armed Forces to go beyond their

function one day?"[6] In subsequent statements, justifying the repressive events, the archbishop of the city of Bahía Blanca, Jorge Mayer, on 27 June 1976, said, "The subversive guerrilla wants to steal the cross, the symbol of all Christians, to crush and to divide all the Argentine people by means of the hammer and the sickle." And again Bonamín, on 10 October 1976, preached before General Bussi in Tucumán, one of the chief areas of horror: "This fight [referring to the actions of the task forces] is a fight for Argentina, for its integrity, but also for its altars. . . . This struggle is a struggle in defense of morality, of human dignity. It is ultimately a struggle in defense of God. I therefore ask for divine protection in this dirty war in which we are engaged."

Much of the media also shared the military's point of view. Mariana Heredia has painstakingly traced these attitudes in publications such as *La Nación, La Prensa*, and the magazine *Criterio*, all of them targeted at different audiences, and has shown similarities and differences in these messages.[7] In 1970, articles in the conservative broadsheet *La Nación* were already constructing political activists as the "operational support" of the guerrillas while during the same period, the tabloid *La Prensa* focused its campaign on the danger for the country of labor disputes. However, Heredia observes that even before Héctor Cámpora became president in 1973, a unified discourse was already present in both newspapers—one defining the *enemy* in two ways: "With the passing of time, a new antagonist was catching the attention of contributors to the publications . . . they identified a persistent group of 'young Jacobins' entrenched in universities and cultural life and, with the same arsenal they used inveterately to combat right-wing nationalists, they now directed their arguments against radicalized sectors of the Peronist Party."[8] When *La Prensa* spoke of "subversives," it was clearly referring not only to members of the armed revolutionary left, but to a wider group of people, as when it mentioned "groups of demonstrators engaged in street rioting, employees or workers who occupy official or private establishments, students who take over high schools, whether financed by the State or privately" (*La Prensa*, 16 June 1973). According to Heredia, the Argentine media of the period was characterized by anti-Peronist sentiment (unrelenting in *La Prensa*, and more inconsistent in *La Nación* and *Criterio*) together with concern about the left's constant questioning of the social order. The broad and ambiguous definition of "subversive criminality" was to be decisive in the creation of the "negative Otherness" that led to genocide. Thus it became possible to construct an unambiguously political enemy without a throwback to the racism of earlier genocides.

From Racial to Political Metaphors: Argentina's "Leap Forward"

In analyzing the Nazi genocides, I stressed the peculiar ethnic and political synthesis in the stereotype of the Jewish-Bolshevik. The political element was a Nazi

innovation. Whereas previous genocides had been linked to colonial rule or to the founding of a new nation-state,[9] it was the attempt to destroy certain types of social relationships that turned the Nazi genocides into reorganizing genocides. Ethnicity also played a central role in the Nazi state and was anchored in earlier racism. However, both evolutionary racism and French degenerative racism were renewed by Nazi theorists like Alfred Rosenberg and Gerhard Wagner, and racism becomes a fundamental way to achieve widespread consensus for genocidal policies serving *political* ends.

Of course, the repression in Argentina was able to build on the experiences of the Nazi genocides and the counterinsurgency wars in Indochina, Algeria, and Vietnam as well as the National Security Doctrine in Latin America. Accordingly, it showed a qualitative leap in the technology of power in terms of its ability to separate political behaviors and social practices from ethnoracial connotations. Unlike Guatemala, where political conflicts were difficult to disentangle from centuries of racial prejudice and subjugation of the indigenous population—an ethnopolitical conflict expressed in the figure of the "communist Indian"[10]—Argentina invented a "negative Otherness" defined wholly in political terms. The figure of "subversive criminal" had all the degenerative features of the Nazi stereotype with none of the references to ethnicity or race.

The concept of "subversive crime" refers to a form of social practice which, as defined by the perpetrators themselves, focuses on a way of confronting reality and establishing relationships with others. This is obvious from the policies of the dictatorship in the field of education materials published at the time. For example, in 1977, the Ministry of Education of the dictatorship distributed a pamphlet entitled "Subversion within the Educational System." This considered as part of the enemy's action "the evident offensive in the area of children's literature, the aim of which is to send a type of message starting from the child and which may enable him or her to become self-educated on the basis of liberty and choice." The same official pamphlet states that "the intention of Marxist publishers is to offer books to accompany children in their struggle to delve into the world of things and the world of adults, to help them not to be afraid of freedom, to help them to have their own wishes, to fight, to assert themselves, to defend their ego against the ego which in many cases parents and institutions try to impose upon them, consciously or unconsciously victims of a system which has tried to make them in its own image and likeness."[11] The military government introduced a course titled "Moral and Civic Education," mandatory in the first three years of middle school. Together with persistent recommendations to betray others as a way of resolving social conflicts, this course not only outlined the old model of social relationships that genocide aimed to destroy but suggested a new model that would make relationships based on "equality" or "reciprocity" impossible. This new model, a key feature of genocidal social practices, can be traced back to the Inquisition.

Nevertheless, this ability to "isolate" the political and persecute only political practices prevented the purpose of genocide from being "contaminated" by the racial metaphor,[12] thus making it more efficient. Although the number of victims in Argentina was relatively small in comparison to earlier and even later systematic annihilation processes, the disappearance of certain social relations is obvious when we consider how easily neoliberal economic policies were imposed during and after the dictatorship. And yet these same policies had made little headway in Argentine society during the thirty years or so prior to the military coup of 1976.[13]

Herein, in my view, lies one of the possible continuities between the two genocidal processes analyzed in this book. Nazism made it possible to implement a genocidal social practice with a political content, even if that content was included within a racist paradigm (the ethnopolitical figure of the Jewish-Bolshevik and "Jewish degeneration" as a stereotype of "negative Otherness"). The Argentine perpetrators and their supporters went a step further, dispensing with racism and creating a highly political but, at the same time, broad and functional stereotype. "Subversive crime" no longer linked politics to an under-race but to an underworld of crime.[14]

However, although this absence of racial or ethnic elements made persecution more efficient in some ways, it also proved to be a headache for Argentina's genocidal apprentices. One of the Argentine perpetrators explains this clearly when called on to analyze the similarities and differences between the Argentine case and the lessons learned by the most important counterinsurgency experts in French Indochina and Algeria. As Argentina's interior minister during the military dictatorship, Albano Harguindeguy, told Marie Monique Robin, "The most terrible thing is how the subversives blend in with the population, making it very difficult to say who the enemy is and who is one of us. That was another difference with Algeria and Indochina, where distinctions were racial as well."[15]

In some ethnopolitical implementations of genocide, inherited physical traits (in particular, skin color) made it relatively easy to select one's victims. In other cases, like the Jewish genocide, physical traits are less easy to distinguish. For this reason, the Nazis described the Jews in ambiguous terms as being *psychologically* rather than *physically* degenerate. However, once genocide is placed on a purely political footing, the identification of potential victims becomes much more arduous. In Argentina, personal appearance (long hair, beards, and shabby clothes) was often taken as an indicator of political beliefs, but only for the purposes of random police checks. In contrast, Ariel Armony highlights the essential role played by the intelligence services in "victim selection."[16]

From the 1960s onward, Argentine military intelligence and the intelligence services attached to the national and provincial police forces spied on

political and social activists, trade unionists, leaders of neighborhood groups, and students, classifying them according to the threat they ostensibly posed to society. When the coup of 24 March 1976 was launched, most of the victims had already been carefully selected through systematic surveillance. This method of targeting victims was fundamentally different from that used in racially motivated persecutions where the victims are easy to identify, although the Nazi genocides often combined both procedures—careful intelligence work and indiscriminate mass roundups.[17]

Harassment: The Logic of Triple A

In chapter 6 I defined harassment as a transitional stage from symbolic violence (negative stereotyping) to physical violence, particularly, in one of its two forms: harassment by quasi-governmental forces. It is striking that quasi-governmental forces played very similar roles in Argentina and in Nazi Germany.

In Germany, the Nazis' paramilitary *Sturmabteilung* (SA, Stormtroopers Division), had several million members and was used to attack synagogues and Jewish property throughout Germany on *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, in November 1938; yet it was separate from the national government. In Argentina, the main quasi-governmental organization was the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance (known as Triple A), a death squad that functioned between July 1973 and March 1976 under the democratically elected governments of Raúl Alberto Lastiri, Juàn Perón, and Isabel Perón and which was responsible for murdering around 1,500 people. The relationship of Triple A with Isabel Perón's minister of social welfare, José López Rega, was well known but never admitted officially.

At the same time, other smaller institutions were set up to support the Triple A or carry out similar operations. This was the case of Comando Libertadores de América (Freedom Fighters of America Commando), headed by Captain Héctor Vergez, who later ran a concentration camp at La Perla, Córdoba, together with his men. It was also the case of Comando Nacionalista del Norte (Nationalist Northern Commando), operating in Tucumán under Inspector Roberto "One Eye" Albornoz. Both units were (clandestinely) attached to the Third Army Corps.

Although some of these men, like Captain Vergez, had been torturers or repressors during previous dictatorships, quasi-governmental groups first appeared with Perón's return from exile on June 20, 1973. From Perón's platform at Ezeiza Airport, snipers fired on the left-wing Peronist Youth and the Montoneros that Perón himself had encouraged during his exile and who had come to welcome their aging leader. At least 13 people were killed and 365 were injured during what became known as the Ezeiza massacre.[18]

From then on, harassment was aimed at weakening and cracking the solidarity between the labor movement, the student movement, neighborhood movements, and armed leftist organizations. The Triple A combined the selective assassination of real or potential intermediaries between various political and social movements with intimidation through sporadic attacks, death threats, and blacklists. This type of harassment was particularly successful in driving a rift between popular movements and armed political organizations, especially in the case of left-wing political organizations unsure about whether to embrace violence. Thus stage two (harassment) and stage three (isolation) of the model presented in chapter 6 were combined in Argentina.[19]

Although accounts of the Argentine genocide tend to start with the coup that institutionalized genocide, it is impossible to understand the historical context and development in which these murders took place without considering the threats, kidnappings, and killings carried out by death squads between 20 June 1973, the day of the Ezeiza massacre, and 24 March 1976, the day of the coup almost three years later. Juan Carlos Marín and Inés Izaguirre have pointed to the importance of these earlier murders as well as the type of victims targeted, usually "social coordinators" who acted as liaisons between senior members of armed leftist movements and ordinary workers or students, connecting the popular grassroots movement with its would-be political or military leaders.

This combined policy of harassment and isolation not only dismantled the connections that already existed, but made it relatively easy to annihilate both groups systematically after the coup. Those annihilated after the coup included the leadership of the armed leftist organizations (which by then had already been defeated, both militarily and politically, even though they were still able to carry out sporadic armed attacks) and militants from the popular grassroots movement (trade union leaders, neighborhood committee members, student activists, etc.).

In turn, harassment by paramilitary forces accomplished all the functions mentioned in my analysis of Nazism in chapter 6. First, it created a social force of perpetrators that would later join the institutional framework of the armed forces and the police (or rather rejoin it since the clandestine units that carried out the harassment were drawn from the army and the security forces). Second, it isolated the victims and encouraged leftist militants with economic resources and political contacts abroad to flee the country. In fact, a large number of Argentine militants (in the broadest sense of the term) chose exile. Third, it generated a "state of chaos" that led to calls from politicians and the media for a force to restore law and order, especially in view of the disarray into which the Peronist government sank after Perón died and his third wife, Isabel Perón, came to power.

As in the case of Nazi Germany, law and order would only be restored by the institutional provision of genocidal social practices. This is explained in

Videla's first speech on assuming the presidency after the military coup: "Only the State, for which we do not accept the role of a mere spectator of the process, will monopolize the use of force, and only its institutions will carry out actions related to internal security. We will use force as often as needed to ensure social peace: with that goal we will fight relentlessly against subversive crime in all its manifestations, to its total annihilation."[20] Chaos "disappeared" when the various quasi-governmental groups were reincorporated into the institutional structure. However, despite Videla's statement, some units now nominally under state control continued to operate more or less autonomously. This was the case with Task Force 3.3.2, which occupied a three-story building including the officers' mess at the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA), or the criminal gang led by Aníbal Gordon, which not only carried out genocidal practices on behalf of the state but used its infrastructure for conducting personal business, kidnappings for the purposes of extortion, random kidnappings, and settling of personal scores, even if these activities were not the main focus of Argentina's genocidal forces. These actions increased from 1978 onward, when leaders of the armed forces were sure that their genocidal objectives—the dismantling and "reorganization" of society—had been met.[21]

In the case of Argentine genocide, stage two (harassment) and stage three (isolation) were thus performed simultaneously, leaving the way open for extermination. But before continuing to this next stage, it is worth considering in more detail how isolation was achieved.

Isolation, from Mapping to Policy: Material Ghettos, Symbolic Ghettos, and Political Ghettos

In chapter 6 I defined isolation as a time whose main objective was "to demarcate a separate social, geographical, economic, political, cultural, and even ideological space for those who are 'different,' and at the same time to sever their social ties with the rest of society." The Nazis isolated the Jews first through restrictions and exclusionary laws and decrees and later by physically enclosing them in ghettos. However, as I said in chapter 6, other less sophisticated "ghettos" have served these same functions at different times and for different populations.

In Argentina, isolation was mostly political. In particular, Juan Domingo Perón's government succeeded in isolating its rivals politically, so there was no need for a physical ghetto. On 25 September 1973, the left-wing Peronist urban guerrilla group Montoneros assassinated José Ignacio Rucci, who was general secretary of the right-wing CGT (General Confederation of Labor) and a close friend of Perón's, in an attempt to force the democratically elected President Perón to negotiate with them. Enraged, Perón asked López Rega to step up the operations of the Triple-A against left-wing opponents. Eventually, Perón

expelled Montoneros from his Justicialist movement during a mass rally in Plaza de Mayo in May 1974.

The expulsion of Montoneros from the Peronist movement together with the murder of those who acted as intermediaries between various left-wing movements was not the only factor that isolated Peronist armed organizations. They were also isolated by their own shortsightedness. By kidnapping and murdering businessmen and Peronist labor leaders, as well as soldiers and policemen, they only alienated themselves even more from their grassroots social movements and the society they intended to lead, while reducing their access to information, commonsense perceptions of Argentine society, and particularly perceptions of their own legitimacy as political actors.

Regarding the targeting of liaisons and intermediaries by quasi-governmental forces, Teresa Meschiatti (a survivor of La Perla concentration camp in Córdoba)[22] speaks of a "selective policy of kidnapping," an appealing name in terms of theory development for the way isolation was achieved in Argentina. As mentioned earlier, these "selective kidnappings" had the clear goal of eliminating anyone able to mediate between labor, social neighborhood or student movements, and leftist organizations, particularly but not exclusively *armed* organizations. The aim was primarily to ensure that these movements did not "make the leap." However, the mistakes these organizations made during this period prevented them from recognizing their urgent and strategic need to protect their political base. The inability of the militant left to organize a "strategic retreat" played a key role in the ease with which they were isolated and then wiped out once the extermination process was unleashed.

As terror became more widespread, the government's policy of isolating militant groups was reinforced by appeals to the population to report suspects for questioning. Gabriela Roffinelli has identified the importance of such appeals in Tucumán, the quintessential Argentinean genocide laboratory. Throughout 1976, Bussi's de facto government published the following booklet in the newspaper *La Gaceta*:

Attention People of Tucumán
Pay attention and cooperate if you find:

- That in your neighborhood, village or area young people without children or with young children have recently moved in;
- That these couples have no relationship with the neighborhood;
- That they have no known family;
- That it is not clear what they are doing here or what they work at.

Because these people may be a threat to your safety, to that of your family and your country. . . . Your information will be valuable.

Argentine Army [23]

As the authorities called upon the population to inform on their neighbors—
and suggesting through terror that this would be the only way to survive—leftist
organizations were isolated from the popular movement that had nurtured
them. In a clear miscalculation, some of these movements encouraged their
militants to abandon their middle-class jobs and lives and move to poor neigh-
borhoods to live like "proletarians." There, despite their willingness and enthu-
siasm, they found themselves hampered by their lack of contacts or skills, by
living among people with whom they had no shared history of militancy and
who were socially and culturally alien to them.

Although in the late 1960s and early 1970s leftist organizations had pene-
trated deeply into various sectors of the popular movement—especially sectors
that had chosen armed struggle or were discussing this possibility—the links
between these organizations and the social movements had been dismembered
by the mid-1970s, well before the coup. There was little sympathy, cooperation,
or even information shared among them. This was not only a result of govern-
ment repression; it was also a consequence of serious errors committed by the
organizations themselves.

These were the conditions that facilitated the coup, after which systematic
extermination began. According to some of the repressors, the annihilation was
intended to eliminate political organizations, political protests, and solidarity
or simply critical thinking in Argentina for at least twenty years.[24] Sadly, this
prediction proved to be extremely accurate. It was not until twenty to thirty
years later that public discussion (for example, in the context of a university
course rather than behind closed doors) began to focus on this specific process
of destruction rather than a so-called terrorist attack on society as a whole. Of
course, there is no guarantee that such discussions can play a role in developing
social relations beyond the hegemonic individualism, solipsism, and commer-
cialism of our times.

Differences between the Logic of Terror and the Industrial Production of Death

The two genocidal practices analyzed in this book differ most notably in the
scope of their objectives and the methods and scale of the killing. The project
of total extermination did not become a key area of Nazi state policy until
mid-1942, and its scale was to exceed all expectations. The Nazis' increasing
insistence during World War II on a systematic "final solution to the Jewish
question" led to a metamorphosis from the concentration camp policy used to
persecute non-Jewish victims, such as political opponents and "asocials"—a
policy typical of modern genocides—to the industrialized murder of Europe's
Jewish and Gypsy populations in death camps, or purpose-built installations

where victims were gassed on arrival, although some of these were also used as concentration camps. [25]

There has been no similar decision in any other genocidal process, including the case of Argentina. Although prisoners were murdered or "transferred" to their deaths in many of the Argentine concentration camps, Argentina's genocidal policy envisaged wiping out only a small part of Argentina's population, and the numbers were not large enough to warrant a production line. In fact, no other genocide in history—including the large-scale genocides of Rwanda and Cambodia—has used an industrial production line for killing human beings.

While both processes shared the symbolic need to get rid of the bodies, the Nazi factories of annihilation with their crematoria and their mass graves were a consequence of a decision to murder *millions* of human beings. It was the sheer scale of the Nazis operation aimed at killing a whole people across a whole continent that led to the invention of the extermination camp as a "political artifact"—a technology created expressly for resolving a specific social problem.[26] In contrast, Argentina's "disappeared" were buried in unmarked graves or thrown from planes into the sea or rivers.[27]

Although I have so far developed several analogies between the Nazi and Argentine genocides, such analogies refer to concentration camps, the ways of representing the "negative Other," and the Nazis' use of what Christopher Browning, Robert Gelatelly, and Eric Johnson call "ordinary men" to destroy a specific structure of social relations. However, the Nazi genocide was more than that. Beyond the actual weight we may give to the Nazis' decision to totally annihilate the Jewish population (and I do not consider this factor to be the main explanation for Nazi genocidal policies), that decision obviously existed and it claimed many more victims than "necessary" to transform social relations. Nevertheless, Nazi overkill was not irrational even though it went beyond the bounds of political usefulness. The death camps were an innovation, making the concentration camp one of the possible stages of genocide, but not the only one.

Accordingly, those who argue that the death camps were the defining feature of the Nazi genocide and that the term "genocide" cannot be applied to other historical events are just as wrong, in my opinion, as those who argue that the Nazi genocide was simply another reorganizing genocide in which concentration camps were used. The Nazis' industrialization of death, due to the decision to annihilate an entire ethnic group, should not be ignored. But it does not, in my view, explain either the function or the true nature of the Nazi genocides, although it gives them a special historical particularity.

Genocide requires terror. In order to eliminate the negative Other, at least a significant number of victims must be physically annihilated. The more terrible their deaths, the more effectively social relations among the surviving

members of society will be destroyed. But death is simply a means to bring about social change—not an end in itself. In my view, this was also true even of the Nazi genocides despite the fact that these were accompanied by what Browning calls a policy of "European racial redesign." In other words, the Nazi genocides were both a means and an end: although social reorganization gave the Nazi genocide its meaning and functionality, the fact that it was an eminently racist genocide cannot be ignored.

Stage four of the model presented in chapter 6 is called "systematic weakening." Policies of systematic weakening are to be found at all stages of various genocidal processes, including the Argentine genocide. Both *physical destruction* and *psychological destruction* (see chapter 6) were central in breaking prisoners' will to resist in Argentina's detention centers and concentration camps. But the need to split up large-scale social groups for industrial annihilation did not exist. Annihilation had a clearly political goal: "disappearing" the bodies of those who *embodied* political organization, protest, and solidarity was a way to achieve, through terror and annihilation, the closure of these social relations in the rest of society.

The "Symbolic Enactment" of Genocidal Social Practices in Argentina: Always "Never Again"

As mentioned in chapter 6, destruction only benefits the perpetrators if it can be turned into certain forms of social narrative that re-present annihilation. Having compared the material elements of genocide in both the Nazi and Argentine genocides, we will now examine social narratives associated with the two genocides—in particular, the socially divisive narratives I call the "symbolic enactment" of genocide. We will see that there are remarkable similarities between the Nazi and Argentine genocides—similarities not found, for example, in the Armenian genocide, where a persistent denial of the basic facts by the Turkish state has been the main form of "symbolic enactment" for nearly a century.

Modes of Identity Denial and Guilt Transfer

In the case of the Nazi genocides, the true identity of the victims has been denied by overemphasizing their ethnicity at the expense of their political significance. Nazi ideology made a clear link between the ethnic and the political. To claim, as many have done, that the victims "were killed simply because they were Jews" erases the political nature of extermination and treats ethnicity as if it were singular and set in stone. It is ethnic essentialism of this sort that makes the Nazis appear "irrational."

In Argentina, where an "ethnic metaphor" was lacking, this sort of denial was more difficult. Nevertheless, it was the dominant discourse between 1984

and 1996. The position of the CONADEP Report, repeated in a variety of books, articles, and films, was to replace "they must have done something [to deserve their fate]"—an expression used to justify the disappearance of people during the dictatorship—with "they had done nothing," an expression that depoliticized the victims, as noted in the previous chapter.

In time, the predominant explanation was that the victims had been mainly "innocent" people represented by the readers of certain books, students seeking to obtain a concessionary bus fare, or neighbors and relatives who just happened to be in the address books of God knows whom.[28] Very few cases—such as the leading cadres of armed groups from the left—did not fit this category.

The Nazi genocide appeared to be irrational because the annihilation of an entire ethnic group was apparently lacking in political meaning. However, the Argentine perpetrators' behavior seemed even more irrational since—leaving aside the political dimension—the victims apparently had nothing in common except that they had been murdered. Certainly, they were not killed because of their ethnicity in a society where most of the population think of themselves as being part of the "same ethnic group." Because the victims did not fit into any unifying category, the perpetrators seemed to have gone completely mad, a widespread perception being that they simply "killed anybody." They were seen as psychopathic serial killers: anyone who got in their way could have been their next victim.

In this way, large parts of the population came to deny their recent past. It was as if social rebellion, solidarity, and a collective critical attitude had never existed in Argentina. In this new version of events, only a few deluded groups detached from society took up arms while sections of the armed forces implemented a system of repression that could kill just about anybody on the grounds that they were defending society from a bunch of deranged fanatics. With "normality" once more restored and those deranged fanatics now safely "disappeared," the armed forces could return to their barracks, and society was cured of the madness of the "two demons."

The meaninglessness that resulted from this denial of identity found expression in the discourses of "transference of guilt," an emblematic case being Pablo Giussani's work, although the basic elements were present in previous as well as later texts, as outlined in chapter 7. Both Giussani and Sabato, in their foreword to the CONADEP Report, unwittingly reveal the link between the denial of identity and the transfer of guilt. Their attempt to rationalize events could be paraphrased more or less as follows: "The mayhem caused by the 'demonic left' *provoked* the military into *overreacting* and, rather than fight mayhem with the rule of law, the military initiated a bloodbath in which most of the victims were *innocent.*" The main difference between the two writers was their choice of adjectives.

Let us spell out the implications of this rationalization of the past:

1. The left-wing armed organizations were not a product of the national and continental social struggle of the time but deluded minority groups, fascinated by the violence of the Cuban revolutionary experience.
2. Their delirium (and not an attempt to destroy certain social relationships and impose a new system of power) was the main cause of the repression in Argentina.
3. The annihilation of the left-wing armed organizations might therefore have been legitimate. What is considered illegitimate is the "spillover," which led to the victimization of the "innocent." (President Alfonsín spoke of "excesses," the term used by Reynaldo Benito Bignone, the last de facto president of the military dictatorship.)
4. There, victims were to be "investigated" to establish their "degree" of innocence (the less involved in politics they were, the greater their innocence). During the 1980s there were even attempts to give such categories a legal footing. Ultimately, this was a way of sanctioning and legitimizing the values imposed by the genocidal process.
5. What made the whole process seem so irrational was that far more victims fitted the "innocent" category than the "guilty" one (if the latter is restricted to the *leaders* of the armed left-wing organizations). This is what morally condemns the military dictatorship in most people's minds.
6. One step that not everyone dared to take, but which the more radical supporters of this model did take, was to transform the "guilty victims" into a group of "perpetrators," making them directly responsible for the annihilation of the other members of their organizations, if not for all the victims of genocide.

Denial of the past and the transference of guilt were achieved more effectively in Argentina than after the Nazi genocides. Although the historical situation was more complex in the case of Argentina, the hegemonic redefinition of events—what I have called their "symbolic enactment"—successfully prevented the reappearance of social relations that had been extinguished. This was done by branding the left as foolhardy and responsible for the massacre.

I believe that this redefinition of events played an important role in the speed with which individualistic, neoliberal policies took root in Argentina during the twenty years after the dictatorship. As I have already suggested, its success lay in the peculiar way it avoided questioning the role of contemporary generations in the genocide. As with any denial mechanism, the extreme simplicity and incoherence of the denial did not diminish its success.

However, its rapid success was, ironically, its main weakness when a new generation burst onto the political scene: the offspring of those who had lived through the terror. A discourse of this kind was not credible for those who

did not need to explain their own part in the events (either to themselves or to others)—that is, for those born around 1970, and who grew up during or after the dictatorship.

This new generation was tormented by a different set of questions: Why were the victims always spoken of in the abstract? Why was there no information about the political organizations of the period, except for disparaging accounts of their armed factions? Where were the parents of these children who grew up during or after the dictatorship when people in our country were being kidnapped, tortured, and annihilated? Why was there no information about opposition or resistance to the military dictatorship? Why had so many contemporary political leaders been involved in the military governments? Where were the thousands of accomplices needed to run a genocide? Why had the majority not raised its voices in defense of the "innocent majority" until 1983? Why had the same media and—with a few honorable exceptions—the same groups of politicians and intellectuals endorsed or at least kept quiet about the genocide, participating in meetings with the perpetrators and thus legitimizing the repression? Why was it necessary to defend the impunity of the perpetrators and their accomplices if they were no more than serial murderers and rapists who, in any other circumstances, would be hounded by courts, politicians, and the media? Why was impunity so necessary to close this "irrational, demonic, and pathological" period in Argentina's history?

These questions erupted in full force on the twentieth anniversary of the coup in March 1996 and the emergence of a new political group, Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence), known simply by its acronym, HIJOS, which is also the Spanish word for "children." Despite the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo and Family Members of the Disappeared and Imprisoned for Political Reasons (Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas), this was a family link that had been missing in the human rights organizations. But, in fact, HIJOS did not represent only the children of the disappeared but all the children in society who could not understand or decode the messages of their parents.[29]

One factor that may be seen as triggering widespread disbelief in the hitherto accepted version of events was the collapse of Argentina's economy in December 2001. There was a state of siege in the Plaza de Mayo on 20 and 21 December as young people—most of them born after 1970—clashed with police. These young demonstrators repeatedly mentioned in front of the television cameras and radio microphones the legacy of "the 30,000 disappeared." Although still an abstraction, "the 30,000" was a very different kind of abstraction from that of the hegemonic discourse. Without necessarily understanding how or why, these young people connected the "30,000" with a dynamic struggle, a confrontation loaded with content.

Of course, the way a young person might interpret this struggle at the beginning of this new century was not necessarily the way the "30,000"—the young people of the 1970s—had done so. But those 30,000 were clearly *not* the 30,000 innocents who did nothing, the victims of an overwhelming, irrational force. This new abstraction of "30,000" did not restore historical truth, but it was enough to deepen the cracks that had appeared since 1996 in the symbolic enactments of genocide and that were already becoming visible before the societal breakdown of 2001.

Argentina's 2001 crisis turned out to be less revolutionary than some leftist movements hoped or believed. It did not establish a new model for understanding the genocide or allow for a return to solidarity and political give-and-take. Encouraging attempts were made in this direction by the *asamblea* (neighborhood assembly) movement that sprang up in 2002. In the *asambleas*, residents tried to solve everyday issues, such as problems of infrastructure, price increases, etc. Sadly, many traditional leftist groups denied, pursued, and ended these initiatives, seeing in them a threat to their own traditional forms of social leadership and pressure.

Nevertheless, since the beginning of the twenty-first century the hegemonic explanation of the Argentine genocide has broken down, opening up a still unresolved and highly contested debate on how best to represent Argentina's reorganizing genocide. This debate has played a key role in political youth movements, including the 30,000-strong La Cámpora, founded by Máximo Kirchner, former president Néstor and current president Cristina Kirchner's son, whose members call themselves "soldiers of Cristina."

Apart from that, a debate is pending about the nature and role of "museums of memory"—museums dedicated to remembering the darker side of the human condition. Also overdue is an attempt to understand the failure of the neoliberal policies of the 1990s without scapegoating particular politicians and officials. Rather, the conventional scapegoats (such as former president Carlos Saúl Menem) should be seen as representing certain practices common to Argentine society as a whole. Both these tasks are more feasible than they had been before 2001 as the social relations blocked by genocide are slowly revived.[30]

The Logic of Demonization and the Role of Horror

I have already analyzed at length how the demonization of the Nazi genocides (which pathologized either the Nazis in particular or Germans in general) played a crucial role in blocking historical analysis and led to alienation from personal experience. In Argentina, both perpetrators and victims were treated as pathological in the "theory of the two demons." The adjectives "hellish" and "demonic" are found in Sabato's own preface to the CONADEP Report. But the

cleavage between genocidal social practices, on the one hand, and victims and perpetrators, on the other, was even greater than it had been following the Nazi genocides.

As in the case of postwar Europe, the period immediately following Argentina's last dictatorship is characterized by an excessive profusion of images of horror. Indeed, the process had already begun in 1983, the last year of the military government. The same publications that had been accomplices of the dictatorship for seven long years—*Gente, Siete Días, Para Ti*, to name only the best known—began to include interviews with relatives of victims or survivors, pictures of mass graves being unearthed, testimonies of repentance, full of banal or distasteful images highlighting the most gruesome and sickening features of horror. This so-called exposure of the dictatorship flooded public opinion with a series of lurid narratives, with particular emphasis being placed on stories of treachery and betrayal, romance between perpetrators and victims, rape, robbery, humiliation, and the details of the repressors' sadistic inventiveness.

This profusion of morbid but unexplained horror plunged readers—and the rest of society—into a state of moral paralysis. If human beings were capable of such horrors, surely it was better to stay at home and not ask too many questions. In this sense, Roberto Jacoby's research during the 1980s illustrated the shifting nature of ordinary people's fears. Jacoby discovered that, after the dictatorship, the place that felt safest was home—even though most victims of genocide had, in fact, been snatched from their homes. This finding illustrates how people's fears and perceptions of their possibilities for political action are neither rational nor coherent; rather, they are shaped by re-presentations of the recent past, the very thing we are trying to think about in these pages.[31]

At the two seminars organized by the Association of Ex-Disappeared Detainees during the years 1996 and 1997 under the auspices of the Human Rights Freedom Chair of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Buenos Aires (see chapter 7), survivors highlighted a dual psychological mandate from the genocidaires to the camp survivors. The first part of the mandate was to narrate the horror, but not in memory of the victims. After years of trying to understand why they had been allowed to survive, the ex-detainees expressed their conclusions with unflinching clarity and concision: go and tell the whole world what has happened to your bodies, what we have done to them, so that nobody ever again dares to do what you have done.[32]

The second part of the mandate discussed in the seminars was also addressed to society as a whole: *trust no one.* And Argentineans unquestionably began to distrust one another, first as an attempt at self-protection, then as part of a culture of individualism. This mandate also seemed to tell us: Beware of the camp survivors, of course, because "there must be a reason why they were allowed to live." But also beware of new friends—who knows why they have come along now—and old friends who cannot explain why they left or did not

leave. Beware of those who never wanted to be friends with you and always keep their distance, because they surely have something to hide. Beware of acquaintances, because they were surely secret accomplices. And beware of strangers who come to steal property or information. Finally, beware of yourselves, of your own outrage at poverty, of your desire to change the world, of the utopia of a fairer society or compassion for anyone who is weaker. Go to therapy and, with the help of new methodologies for rapid healing and self-help, "help yourselves" and only yourselves.

Mistrust was one of the most effective ways to end relations of reciprocity and solidarity. One cannot found an oppositional or critical political struggle on a basis of mutual suspicion. This fact explains the disarray existing among the surviving leftist forces during the 1980s and 1990s. If it is impossible for me to trust anyone, then all I can do is look out for myself and take care of number one, a form of politics that ends up being antipolitical if by politics we mean the negotiation of power among *social groups.*

It was no coincidence that this distrust appeared at a time when the political system was widely discredited. Indeed, the best way to discredit any struggle in the postdictatorship era was to describe it as *political.* Even elected politicians played on this fear. "You have political objectives" was the first accusation thrown at any rival by the democratic governments of Raúl Alfonsín, Carlos Menem, Fernando De La Rua, or Eduardo Duhalde. And indeed, the whole political spectrum represented in parliament and in the hegemonic media thought in this way: "They are not defending their own interests," meaning that each person should look after his or her individual or, at best, corporate interests.

The logic of this approach suggested that if a person devoted time and energy to politics, if they cared about others more than about themselves, this should not be seen as an altruistic action worthy of emulation, a generosity that puts a concern for others above one's self-interest. Rather, such a person lacked legitimacy and was not to be trusted. From this point of view, a political struggle that could not be explained in terms of self-interest had to be a swindle or a con. Thus, horror led to paralysis, then to suspicion and distrust, and finally to individualism. And these consequences of genocide affected economic, social, and cultural policies for almost twenty years. The 2001 crisis was just a glimpse of the cracks in a social and political model that still remains dominant in its ability to discourage certain ways of relating while promoting others.

Repoliticizing the Seventies through the Discourse of War: Possibilities and Limits

Hegemonic models of representation do not develop unopposed or operate within a vacuum. Throughout this period, one of the discourses that sought to

confront the depoliticizing of the Argentine genocide was that of civil war. As mentioned in chapter 7, the clearest exponents of this position were Marín and Izaguirre.

The discourse of civil war acknowledged the political nature of the struggle—or at least attempted to do so. Marín traces the conflict back farther than 1976 or even 1973, to the military coup that ousted Perón in September 1955 and especially to the bombing of civilians in the Plaza de Mayo in June 1955, the shooting of Peronist rebels in 1956, and the military's refusal to include popular sectors in the government. Persecution left the defeated sectors of the Peronist movement with few options, one of which was armed confrontation.

Seeing these historical moments and the different social forces and meanings as part of a shifting balance of power restored to both victims and perpetrators a sense of identity. Therefore, it amounted to a clear attempt at repoliticizing Argentina's recent history, an attempt that was ignored and quickly silenced by the academics and journalists of the period.

I also noted in the previous chapter, however, the limits of this approach. Treating social forces as armies—albeit engaged in a highly unequal civil war—and focusing on the military-political conflict and the number of "casualties" simply reproduced the way the perpetrators presented the conflict (the military always claimed to be carrying out a "dirty war"). At the same time, this approach made it difficult to understand how a rebellious social force had appeared which, despite the enthusiasm and triumphal perceptions of its young members, was not at all in a position to fight a civil war. More importantly, it hid the fact that the perpetrators had created a stereotype of their victims (which I call their "negative Otherness" in this book) that did not necessarily require them to be members of an army or participants in a civil war or warlike situation.

On the contrary, the Dirty War had been unleashed against the social whole to "reorganize" it. As in all reorganizing genocides, the murder of the direct victims was a message to the wider population—the indirect victims. The process did not aim to produce a specific number or type of "casualties"; rather, its purpose lay in the conclusions society would draw about the dead, the survivors, the wounded, and the exiled. In particular, the gruesome way in which the disappeared met their deaths was meant to destroy the social fabric and create a new social, cultural, and political climate—in short, a new form of governance.

There is a risk of "reifying" the Argentine genocide in terms of armed actions, casualties, and so forth if we compare it to the civil wars in Central America. In Nicaragua and El Salvador, the size of the military forces was decisive and—in each case—both sides in the military conflict were clearly defined politically. But the Argentine genocide is clearly different from these two cases, and comparisons tend to miss indentifying the specific nature of the Argentine conflict that is crucial for understanding subsequent political events.[33]

The Human Rights Organizations:
Material and Symbolic Struggles

For over twenty years, the Argentine human rights organizations—with all their nuances and differences—have worked hard to undo some of the consequences of genocide, in particular through their uneven fight against impunity. First, these organizations took part in the debate on how the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) should be composed, insisting on the desirability of including a Bicameral Commission of Inquiry made up of national deputies and senators. Then they were constant and tireless in presenting testimonies and documents at the court trials of various perpetrators. Afterward, they struggled bravely at the end of the 1980s and during the following decade to overturn the impunity laws and pardons. In this way, the Argentine human rights organizations became a moral reserve of society, many of them going beyond their original agendas to denounce "trigger-happy" police, the intimidation of popular, neighborhood, or student activists, and the use of torture in prisons during the democratic period.

Here, the role played by these groups in attempting to develop an alternative view of events cannot be emphasized too strongly. And yet, despite all this, they consciously, or nearly consciously, left the fight in the hands of lawyers (who, in positivist terms, are the only ones who know) and prioritized the legal battle (the real possibility that perpetrators might be sent to prison) over the symbolic struggle (law as a producer of truth, and a socially sanctioned way of understanding the past).

Because their priority was to send the perpetrators to jail, these groups saw the symbolic aspects of the struggle as being of secondary importance. In the 1980s the need for effective action prevailed over strategic analysis—and it is hard to see how it could have been otherwise. I, too, endorsed the need to put "trial and punishment" before symbolic or political analysis. Back then, what to *call* the crimes committed, for example, seemed like a trivial language game. For this reason, trials were the result of adding together individual offenses—unlawful deprivation of liberty, murder, torture, rape, robbery, abduction of minors, kidnapping—committed against individual subjects. This was a mistake.

It is true that Eduardo Barcesat, and some other truly visionary jurists for their time, had suggested bringing charges of genocide—a crime committed not against individuals but against a social group—but the idea was rejected by the human rights organizations' lawyers because of the clearly political nature of the killings and the fact that the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) does not cover political groups.

In the event, however, the 1986 Full Stop Law and the 1987 Due Obedience Law proved to be stronger than any activist and/or professional legal work—except where the kidnapping of children or theft of private property was

involved.[34] Because these crimes had been excluded from Alfonsín's amnesty laws, it was later possible to condemn some of the repressors to a comfortable house arrest—but impunity remained rife until the impunity laws were overturned by the Argentine Supreme Court in June 2005 with the blessing of Néstor Kirchner.

In short, prioritizing the material effects of law over its symbolic effects led to defeat on both fronts. The perpetrators remained unpunished for decades, and society's understanding of events remained trapped in a summation of individual crimes, a form of understanding that fitted perfectly with other symbolic embodiments of genocide. If it was the sum of individual violations of human rights, the perpetrators could be thought of as insane serial killers or as part of a regime that disregarded individual rights. The ideas of "excess" or "misunderstanding" were consistent with an individualistic way of understanding events.

Durkheim points out that a "social fact"—a social phenomenon like language, law, morality, or public opinion that shapes and constrains individual behavior—is total and qualitatively different from the sum of individual facts.[35] A genocide, in this sense, is a total social practice and qualitatively different from the sum of tens of thousands of homicides or unlawful deprivations of liberty, or tens of thousands of cases of torture, or hundreds of rapes. Viewing them as individual crimes meant trying those responsible for individual crimes.

Spanish law allows for an *acusación popular,* whereby an action may be brought in the public interest by any Spanish citizen, necessarily an injured party. It was not until fifteen years after the end of the dictatorship that Carlos Slepoy, an Argentine human-rights lawyer practicing in Madrid, brought an *acusación popular* in Spain against members of the Argentine military for genocide and terrorism. In doing so, he was helped by various human rights organizations that had refused to compromise their principles in all this time.

In Spain, lawyers first bring the lawsuit to an investigating judge, who examines the evidence, interviews witnesses, and determines whether the case should be brought to trial. In this case the investigating judge was Baltasar Garzón. In November 1999, Garzón charged Argentine naval officer Adolfo Scilingo—who had confessed to participating in so-called death flights—with genocide. Finally, Scilingo was convicted in 2005 of crimes against humanity. However, the action itself and Garzon's argument that genocide committed against "part of a national group" can equally well refer to the perpetrator's national group reopened the debate about how to define events in Argentina.

This debate was revived with the reopening of trials in Argentina. One highlight of these trials was the sentencing of a former senior police officer in Buenos Aires, Miguel Etchecolatz, by the Oral Procedure Court for Federal Crimes No. 1 of La Plata, Buenos Aires, in 2006. The tribunal found that Etchecolatz, who served during the early years of the military dictatorship, could not be accused of genocide because this crime had not been included in the

original indictment. Instead, he was sentenced to life imprisonment for "crimes against humanity in the context of the genocide that took place in Argentina." Thus, the sentence not only emphasized that genocide had indeed been committed in Argentina, but suggested this charge be used in subsequent trials.

It is still too early to know the effects of these decisions, but they will certainly be important in confronting the symbolic embodiments of genocidal processes in Argentina. On 22 December 2010, General Videla was sentenced to life in a civilian prison for his part in the deaths of thirty-one prisoners. More recently, on 5 July 2012, Videla, Bignone, and seven others were found guilty of the systematic abduction of babies born to political prisoners. Videla received a fifty-year sentence, while Bignone was given fifteen years. However, justice in Argentina is slow and many perpetrators will surely escape jail for reasons of age if they are ever brought to trial at all.

A Struggle for Identity

It should be clear by now that my interest in defining the Argentine state terror of 1976–1983 as genocide is more than merely an academic attempt to create schools of understanding of what happened. Such schools could only settle their arguments before a jury. Nor am I attempting a specific legal debate, which is the province of trial lawyers. This debate has been taken up with the reopening of trials against the perpetrators.

Argentina's understanding of its own present depends largely on how it understands the events of the 1970s. If I have managed to convince you, the reader, that the primary goal of reorganizing genocide—at least, as it has been practiced in Argentina—is to destroy and rebuild social relations, it follows that this destruction and rebuilding requires a specific mode of "symbolic enactment" by which materially annihilated relations are reannihilated in the field of the symbolic: "There is no rebellious society. The young are not critical and show no solidarity. In truth such a thing has never existed. For it is impossible." Hence, skepticism that leads to solipsism and blinkered self-interest: "There was a sect of deluded terrorists. There was an innocent society. There was a power that, in trying to suppress the deluded, produced a series of individual violations of human rights which a democratic republic cannot tolerate. They should be expected to answer legally for each of these violations." Or not, depending on how radical one's approach is.

Genocide is aimed at a group, not at a collection of individuals. In Argentina, each of the victims was "guilty" of what the perpetrators wanted to destroy—but so too were the survivors of the detention centers and concentration camps and those who managed to avoid being abducted. However, they did not necessarily escape the effects of terror in their ways of relating to others, in their memories, and in their consciences.

Justifications of the type "there must have been a reason [why they were killed]"—cleverly reformulated by Elsa Drucaroff as "there *was* a reason"[36]—cannot be combated by claiming "they were innocent." However, turning the victims into members of an army that most never even knew they belonged to is no solution, either. In trying to understand what members of the establishment tried to destroy, what they understood by "subversive crime," perhaps we—those who were not yet born or who, like myself, remember horror prowling the streets of our childhood— will discover the kind of society our parents strove to build in Argentina. Perhaps, too, we can force them to remember what they were like when they were not only concerned about themselves, when it was much more common to show solidarity, or be critical, or trust other people—when, in short, they attempted to rebuild not only the political but, fundamentally, the social and cultural order.

In a sense, genocide undermines classical liberal law because genocide can only be exercised against a group. It is a legal category that takes no account of people as individuals, only as members of a group, as part of a social force, as the incarnation of certain social relations. Understanding the events as genocide in Argentina means being able to start this debate. And it is perhaps vital to do so from the field of law, whatever the practical outcomes may be in terms of prison sentences. It is necessary to demonstrate the genocidal nature of the events and force the perpetrators to account for the systematic nature of their practices. It is necessary to expose the definitions embedded in their genocidal as well as their postgenocidal discourses. And it is necessary to force international law to argue philosophy, to question distinctions between human groups based on identity (what they are) and action (what they do), and to recognize that excluding political groups from the 1948 Genocide Convention provided what Donnedieu de Vabres called the ideal excuse to endorse any genocidal process since all social events have a political basis.

As I have already pointed out, the debate about whether events in Argentina can or should be described as genocide is not just an academic one. But it is that, too. This book is a scholar's search for legal, historical, philosophical—and also political—meaning. Indeed, liberal constitutionalists— a species now condemned worldwide by the hegemonic media that seek to reduce our freedoms–have been at pains to point out that the main strength of law lies not in the nature of the penalties but in the way law structures the discourses of truth. This point was also made by Foucault, even before the Argentine genocide.[37] Too bad we are beginning to realize this so late in the day! How, then, should we resume the debate from this time forward?

Appendix or Digression: Papiernik, Villani, and Analogies

On a hot day in March 2001, as I was finishing my first course on "Analysis of Genocidal Social Practices" in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of

Buenos Aires, we organized a public event—which turned out to be very well attended—in which survivors of concentration camps told their stories and then talked to our students and anyone else who wanted to take part. The idea was to talk to them using the concepts developed during the course, many of which are contained in this book. We were accompanied by our good friend Charles Papiernik, who was interned for almost four years in Auschwitz, together with three survivors of clandestine detention centers in Argentina—Jorge Paladino, Mario Villani, and Graciela Daleo.

After some humming and hawing, Charles Papiernik refused to be the first to speak—despite the insistence of the Argentine survivors because he was the oldest—so Mario Villani took on the difficult role. His presentation was as tough as it was enlightening. He felt obliged to return—like every survivor—to the concentration camps where he had lived for nearly four years and, from there, to tell stories of resistance, friendship, humor, and grief.

Since the mid-1990s, we had been coming under mounting criticism at home and abroad for having the courage to draw analogies and carry out comparative studies between the Nazi concentration camps and those in Argentina, treating both as instances of "genocide," which was clearly "wrong" in the view of the academic mainstream.

I could not remember ever hearing two survivors speak in public about their experiences. I had not talked with Charles about the issue, so I did not know how he would take Mario's words and, more importantly, my strange proposal for them to speak together in the same forum under the umbrella heading of "Analysis of Genocidal Social Practices," as my subject was called.

I have said that Mario's testimony was moving. Charles was absolutely shocked. Not that he did not know what had happened in Argentina. In fact, he had lived in his house in Villa Crespo during the years of the dictatorship and had even spoken to relatives of the disappeared, who had told him their stories and sufferings. But as those of us who have heard numerous testimonies from survivors know, it is not the same to read the newspaper or talk with family or friends as to be present at the *reentry* of a concentration camp survivor into society, a *reentry* without which it is impossible to be a witness, a *reentry* we know will cost the witness days or weeks of renewed pain and anguish.

Charles, who was used to being a witness, was listening to another witness like himself, but not Jack Fuchs or Eugenia Unger, not a Jewish victim from the Nazi camps in Poland. This was a non-Jewish Argentinean, Mario Villani, recounting his journey through Argentina's concentration camps, in which only very occasionally the officers said something in German "to act like Nazis."

This is why Charles's eyes filled with tears as Mario was ending his reminiscences, and why he could not wait even a second more to embrace him when he concluded, hugging him like a friend or as he might have hugged his brother who did not return from Auschwitz and whom he spoke about later that evening.

When the embrace ended, someone passed the microphone to Charles. But there was only silence. Charles could not speak. I had heard him speak hundreds of times: to high school students, to Jewish community leaders, with other survivors from the Nazi concentration camps, among friends, among ourselves. But that day Charles was at a loss for words. He stared for a long time at the nearly two hundred people gathered in the Aula Magna in Uriburu Street, in the city of Buenos Aires, and he could not utter a sound.

And then he started: "I have nothing to say," he said. "I came here to tell you about genocide but I have nothing to say. What I lived through in Auschwitz was the same, the same thing he has just told you. The same."

I had to insist quietly that he speak. He was standing next to me and I was able to hug him gently and tell him that we knew it was *the same*, but for that very reason we needed to listen to him.

And only then was he able to talk about his brother murdered in Auschwitz, about the woman he was in love with for only a day, about the false rumors of an Allied advance to give courage to the dying, about stories of friendship, humiliation, resistance, and pain of the inmates of Auschwitz.

Then it was Jorge and Graciela's turn to speak. Jorge talked about his walks to the ice cream parlor with his cellmate, measured in steps inside their bunks, about his absurd illusion—which lasted well into his stay at the camp—that they would be sent to "recovery farms" in the south, about his surprise and what Pilar Calveiro would call the "lines of flight" that had stopped him from going mad.

Graciela did not testify but she tried to think: she did not want to return to the ESMA that night, but she shared with us what the ex-disappeared detainees had been mulling over for several years at their meetings, which became a valuable contribution to our own thinking.

I am not trying to say that in objective terms Auschwitz was the same as the ESMA, the Athletic Club that was a torture center in Buenos Aires, or the Olympus concentration camp, beyond Charles's need to express it in that way. Countless historians have described the specific content of these historical events. Much less work has been done on the subjective experiences of concentration camp inmates—but we can assume that our conclusions would be similar. We know that they are not "the same," and the comparisons in this book are in no way intended to suggest otherwise.

But dealing with these events together—the ESMA and Auschwitz, the Nazi genocide and the Argentine genocide—carries a different meaning from speaking about them separately. Certainly it has for Charles, Mario, Jorge, and Graciela. And also for me. And I hope, too, for my readers. Let this digression stand, then, as another justification for this book.