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Genocide as Social Practice

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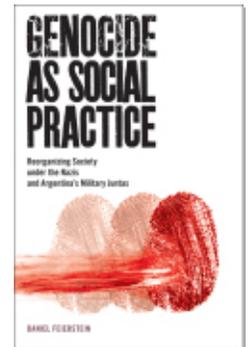
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Concentration Camp Logic

For each one we touch, a thousand paralyzed with fear. We act by irradiation.

—Eduardo Pavlovsky, *El señor Galíndez*

As we have seen in previous chapters, the Nazis not only created a new type of genocide—what I call “reorganizing genocide”; they also used various methods to kill their victims, including shootings, gassings, death marches, starvation, and disease. One of the distinctive features of the Nazi genocides was the use of concentration camps as tools of oppression and mass extermination. On the other hand, the Argentine genocide—although much smaller in scale—can be thought of as one of the most successful and cost-effective instances of “reorganizing genocide” in terms of destroying and rebuilding the social fabric. An interesting innovation is that, unlike earlier genocidal processes or even other military dictatorships in the region, this self-styled “National Reorganization Process” made no bones about its true aims.

The main purpose of this chapter is to describe and account for the distinctive features of “reorganizing genocide.” In particular, it will explore the material and symbolic effects of using concentration camps to “discipline” society and suggest ways of confronting some of their effects. The primary sources for this chapter are survivor testimonies from both genocides—especially Argentine testimonies, which have been studied much less frequently. These are the voices of ghosts—of the “reappeared” who came back from hell and who, in Juan Gelman’s words, were twice-silenced: “from within, because they lived through unspeakable experiences; from without, because many ears are closed to what they have to tell.”¹

Survivors of the Nazi camps did not find a receptive audience until many years after their “reappearance.” Bruno Bettelheim’s writings, which recounted his experiences in the Buchenwald concentration camp, were rejected for years because they were considered “exaggerated” or “not credible”—and because they were too sad. The work of Primo Levi and other survivors did not become widely known until the 1970s. Perhaps it is not too surprising, then, that the

Argentine “reappeared” were either suspected of collaboration—and shunned like the plague—or transformed into talking machines, endlessly reciting a litany of horror but required to remain silent about their previous political activity or about their feelings after “liberation.”² In both cases, the dead were blameless, while the survivors had to bear the shame of reappearance . . . Why were they still alive when others were dead? They had no right to speak, and their testimony was discredited.

In Argentina, the media devoted pages and hours of broadcasting time to giving a voice to the mothers, relatives, and even human rights activists—but not to the survivors. Once the dictatorship was over, survivors had to fight for another fifteen years before they could begin to “appear” and make their voices heard. And yet they were the ones who had returned from the horror and who knew *at first hand* what had happened in the camps and detention centers. Perhaps their real problem was that they were also members of a generation and a political project that had been defeated.

This chapter seeks to recover their voices, without which it would be impossible to reflect on the nature and role of Argentina’s concentration camps as instruments of social oppression and social change.

The Peculiar Features of Reorganizing Genocide: Destruction and Reconstruction of the Social Fabric

I have already argued that what made reorganizing genocide new and different from previous genocidal social practices was that it was directed “inward” at an already established society. Reorganizing genocide sets out to transform social relations *within an existing nation-state* in ways that profoundly alter it. In this sense it is quite different from genocide aimed at “outsiders,” whether these be indigenous populations (colonial genocide), former colonizers (postcolonial genocide), or unwanted groups within the context of building a new nation-state (foundational genocide). This was one of the considerations that led Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón and (later) Argentine judge Carlos Rozanski to describe the events in Argentina as genocide. State terror in Argentina had transformed the social fabric to such an extent that the “Argentine national group” (which is a national group and therefore protected by the 1948 Genocide Convention) had disappeared as such and had become radically different.

Beyond its legal implications, which were discussed in chapter 1, these arguments, in my view, are fundamental to understanding the specific nature of reorganizing genocide: its purpose and ability to alter, through death and horror, the dominant modes of social relations. In Argentina, there had been political opposition to the traditional agro-exporter and rentier economic model for over thirty years.³ The purpose of genocide was to eliminate this

resistance, which came mainly from unions and workers' commissions, political and armed movements, and student and neighborhood movements.

But this chapter also sets out to examine social facilitation⁴ and the ability to resist. By social facilitation I mean social practices that make a particular policy possible or not—for example, regarding others as equals, being outraged at injustice, trusting others, putting solidarity first, taking responsibility for those in need, having the utopian dream of building a better world together, and valuing the primacy of collective decisions over individual sentiments, among others. For what was striking about Argentine politics in the 1960s and 1970s was not the leftist organizations' grasp of the historical situation or the clarity of their policy objectives. In fact, they made enormous mistakes in both areas and paid a heavy cost for them. Rather, it was the generous commitment shown by left-wing militants, including their conviction that a just society was possible. These qualities, in my opinion, do not deserve the contempt and ridicule with which they are often greeted nowadays, when individualism is more or less taken for granted.

In saying this, I am not attempting to whitewash the political and social developments of the period. On the contrary, an urgent critical appraisal of this period is needed—one that focuses either on the serious misconceptions that plagued Argentina's left-wing organizations or on the appropriateness and effectiveness of their political actions, or both. But, in our morally subjective times, where individual needs routinely outweigh collective decision-making processes and even oppositional and critical sectors place their right to protest above political consensus, it is salutary to note how this different way of doing politics was linked to a different style of social relations.

The aim of "national reorganization" was precisely to create the type of society in which we find ourselves today: an atomized community with countless individual grievances, with thousands of public figures unable to speak to one another, with numerous, self-enclosed identities—national, ethnic, sexual, and, of course, political—and with self-obsessed interest groups incapable of feeling indignant about the plight of others or even recognizing their needs. Let us briefly list some of these interest groups. They include Argentina's small savers, cheated out of their savings during the economic crisis of 2001;⁵ college students defending free education; the beneficiaries of social plans; unionized workers; workers hired illegally; teachers with starvation salaries; overworked nurses; people in working-class and middle-class neighborhoods harassed by criminal gangs often run by the police themselves; relatives of victims of the AMIA bombing⁶ or of the República Cromañón nightclub fire;⁷ women denied the right to an abortion; indigenous peoples displaced from their traditional land; Afro-descendants, who are rediscovering their identity; and countless other sectors, each absorbed in its own problems. Often they look to journalists for answers and solutions. However, this method gives no guarantee of success

and, seen in a wider perspective, it simply creates an ever more unjust and intolerant society of individualists increasingly pursuing their own self-interest. Solutions are not for society as a whole, but only for the interest group in question.

As Guillermo O'Donnell suggested, "And why the fuck should I care?" reflected a widespread sentiment among the Argentine working class, challenging established power relations, while responding to the question, "Do you know who you're talking to?" was an aristocratic attempt to project power by mere presence. In the postgenocidal period, however, "And why the fuck should I care?" took on quite the opposite meaning from that suggested by O'Donnell. Now, what no longer mattered was what happened to other people or the fact that *my* way of solving *my* problem may be creating problems for others who are not part of my interest group. The expression "And why the fuck should I care?" was no longer a challenge to an arrogant and aristocratic power figure but a rebellion against the notion of solidarity. Why the fuck should I care about hunger, suffering, the breakdown of law and order, in short, about other people's misfortunes?⁸

The political organizations of the 1970s went so far as to send many of their most intellectual and highly trained administrators to work as factory workers. In my view, this was a serious political mistake. But it showed a level of generosity and commitment that today would be unthinkable. In contrast, when representatives of different interest groups sit at a negotiating table nowadays with representatives of the state, the first question many of them ask is, "What's in it for me?" Not even "for us" but "for me." There is no need for government officials to co-opt or bribe these social interlocutors as was habitual in the past; many now set their own price for betraying their causes—a price that is usually affordable for Argentina's public administration in such a highly competitive market.

My assumption is that inward-looking individualism, selfishness, and betrayal on this scale are partly a consequence of reorganizing genocide—not an unintended or regrettable side-effect, but a desired outcome of this practice. Courage, heroism, and political commitment are not just individual qualities; they require a social environment in which they can flourish and then become either widespread or expected behaviors, or both. For the same reason, an analysis of corruption cannot assume that only a limited number of individuals—for example, the supporters of former President Carlos Menem—were (and are) essentially corrupt without considering the wider social context. By ignoring the social context, we run the risk of feeding racist theories about the Argentinean character, along lines similar to those of the nineteenth century, which deplored the *mestizo* and indigenous origins of the country's inhabitants.

Corruption became a widespread practice in Argentina after the disappearance of those who most obviously embodied cooperative and honest social

relations. Most importantly, it resulted from the simultaneous loss of these individuals together with the terror generated by their disappearance in the surviving members of society. And the fundamental tool in this process of transformation—destruction and remaking—of social relations was the concentration camp. At the seminars held by the Association of Ex-Disappeared Detainees (AEDD) in 1996 and 1997, mentioned in previous chapters, we developed a metaphor created by the concentration camp survivors themselves and which—in my view—clearly summarizes how reorganizing genocide works. They called it “the metaphor of the bouillon cube (or stock cube) and soup.”

As mentioned earlier, concentration camp survivors frequently ask why they were allowed to live while others perished. When asked to explain why they needed to discuss their experiences *in public*, members of AEDD answered that they felt they had been part of a bouillon cube—the concentration camp—that was intended to dissolve into the social broth as a whole. Consequently, it was important both for the survivors and for society at large to understand the nature and consequences of the concentration camp experience. In the words of the survivors themselves, “We believe the ‘social soup’ reproduced and induced, with varying degrees of dilution, relationships, reactions and individual and social behaviors similar to those within the concentration camps.”⁹ The seminars were extraordinary for many reasons that are not relevant to this discussion, but one of them is worth mentioning here.

One would have expected the media or other sectors of society to invite the “reappeared” to tell their stories at one time or another. But in fact these survivors were ignored for almost fifteen years until they took the step themselves of organizing a public discussion to help people understand what had happened—and what was still happening—in a society from which they had been absent, locked away in concentration camps. Even so, they did not ask their contemporaries—as they might well have done—how and why some people were able to go about their daily lives while others were branded forever in body and soul by the horror of the camps. Nor did they force them to listen to their testimonies—the complete testimonies that Argentine society had never wanted to listen to before. Instead, they eagerly questioned the public—young people who had been children during the dictatorship, and indeed anyone who was willing to take part—about how they had survived *outside* the camps, what life had been like for them in the “social stock,” how much of the “cube” had dissolved, and what similarities and differences they saw between the camps and the surrounding society.

Justifying the need for those who had been inside and outside to work together, they said:

We proposed a joint effort between those of us who were in the “cube” and those who were in the “soup.” And the importance of working

together from different but related perspectives arises from having noticed over the years a sense of alienation, a separation between those who seem to have suffered during the dictatorship and a great mass of people that seems not to have suffered. Not that we want to socialize our pain so that we will hurt less, but we believe it is important for society to recognize their own experiences. . . . Because that “alienation,” that idea that “the dictatorship happened to militants, relatives and victims” sometimes makes the pursuit of justice seem like an act of solidarity with those who are listed as “direct victims,” and not like a personal need.¹⁰

Some of the conclusions of the seminar, including attempts to spread distrust as a fundamental social practice, are discussed in other chapters. However, the way this particular insight appeared and was developed was novel and unique. It speaks reams about the many ways in which people were able to survive genocide, as well as the fissures in the Argentine military’s project of national reorganization.

Concentration Camp Power as Social Discipline

Assuming, then, that the concentration camp was a two-way device, operating both on the inmates of the camp and on society as a whole, the question arises as to how it affected each of these two groups. Numerous testimonies of survivors of Nazi and Argentine concentration camps center on what Bruno Bettelheim describes as the “breaking down” of personality. The guards’ systematic brutality was intended to break the inmates as *social beings*, destroying their capacity for self-determination. Bettelheim’s work focuses mainly on personal autonomy in an individual sense. However, I think the breakdown Bettelheim describes was both individual and social. The stereotypical image of Nazi concentration camp survivors was that of the “living dead”¹¹—human beings who had lost all control over their lives and were no longer able to decide even the simplest things for themselves.

While these powerless figures might seem to the perpetrators to be “ideal” members of society, it is clear that even authority would disappear if all citizens’ autonomy were denied to this point. However, the example of *total domination* that occurred in the concentration camps demonstrated the perpetrators’ ability to override individual and social autonomy on a wider scale. In this sense, the concentration camp was what Max Weber called an “ideal type”—a selective, one-sided representation of an aspect of social life.¹² As regards society at large, the aim was not to create “living dead,” but to keep people frightened enough to ensure continuity, obedience, and order.

The literature on concentration camps and “total institutions” such as psychiatric hospitals emphasizes the deliberate and systematic destruction of personality that occurs in such places. The following procedures, described by

Bruno Bettelheim and Pilar Calveiro as well as by the sociologist Erving Goffman in his book *Asylums*,¹³ are typical of most testimonies of most concentration camp survivors.¹⁴

1. Destruction of Identity

In both Argentina and Nazi-occupied Europe, the prisoner's name was exchanged for a number as soon as he or she entered a concentration camp. But loss of identity went beyond that. As Bettelheim observes, inmates were cut off from the references that defined their identity: everything for which they were known, recognized, or stigmatized outside the camp was erased, from their professional to their social status, and they were denied all contact with friends, family, or members of political organizations. Within the concentration camp, their identity was determined only by the way they behaved *within* the camp—their response to torture and brutality and their greater or lesser degree of collaboration. Faced with situations they could not even imagine before entering the camps and for which they were psychologically unprepared, their self-esteem collapsed. Viktor Frankl spent three years in Auschwitz and three other camps. He remarked: "The majority of prisoners suffered from a kind of inferiority complex. We all had once been or had fancied ourselves to be 'somebody.' Now we were treated like complete nonentities."¹⁵

2. Annulment of Perception and Mobility

While prisoners' previous identity was being erased, they were simultaneously prevented from recognizing their new environment. In the Nazi camps, detainees could be executed on the spot for trying to discover the camp's position and layout or for monitoring the punishments meted out to other detainees. Survivors also described how prisoners became cynical and apathetic, "looking without seeing," incapable of responding ethically or reflecting on their environment or fate.

In Argentina, sensory deprivation was taken a step further. On arrival at the camp or detention center, the "disappeared" were blindfolded or their heads were covered with hoods or bags—a treatment known as "walling up"—while their mobility was restricted by shackles or threats. Moreover, communication between detainees was prohibited, and sometimes they could not even communicate with the perpetrators, except during interrogations.

The combined effect of these procedures was social and physical disorientation followed by a breakdown of personality. Feelings of panic were common in prisoners subjected to these conditions for more than just a few hours. The victims, plunged into total darkness, silence, and immobility, tended to lose all track of time and space. Often, prisoners were stripped of all their clothing, which left the body not only in darkness, silence, and immobility, but also naked and vulnerable.

3. “Initiation”: The Role of Torture

If incarceration in a concentration camp involved restrictions on perception and mobility and loss of identity, initiation into concentration camp life was via brutality and torture or both. Inmates were subjected to beatings, asphyxiation, and a variety of physical punishments during their first hours and days at the camp as a way to breaking them in and getting them used to their new condition.

In Argentina torture was used on a regular basis. Pilar Calveiro lists three main functions of torture in these cases:

- a. Extraction of information
- b. “Cleansing ritual”
- c. Physical and psychological destruction.¹⁶

As already pointed out in other chapters, torture as a way of extracting information drew on lessons learned during the French counterinsurgency wars. Usually, prisoners were tortured for information for the first two or three days, and the procedure, as Calveiro puts it, was “aseptic” and “functional.” The information obtained led to a growing spiral of kidnappings, torture, and information.

One of the oldest motivations for torture is purification. With the Inquisition, for example, the infliction of pain generally ended when prisoners admitted to their sins. Once they had confessed, they were usually killed quickly since their souls supposedly had been saved through repentance. In the Argentina of the 1970s, the victims were tortured until they accepted the guilt constructed for them by the perpetrators. Whether they were really guilty or not was—for the perpetrators’ ends—neither here nor there. However, Calveiro claims that torture as a “cleansing ritual” existed only in some cases, such as the centers run by the air force and the federal police.

Calveiro is less precise about another use of torture that has existed in all concentration camps: torture as a way of breaking the inmates’ will. To “adapt,” inmates were required to deny their own identity and to adopt the values of their captors, but obviously this left room for dissembling and partial adaptation. The prisoners’ bodies were therefore repeatedly subjected to pain in order to counteract attempts to keep identity alive—an identity that camp routines were also designed to erase, but which the detainees might nevertheless bury deep inside themselves.

4. Infantilization and Animalization

To the already mentioned procedures can be added what authors and survivors call infantilization (or regression) and animalization, all of which involve the destruction of agency and self-determination.

In the concentration camps, prisoners lost control of their most basic human functions. They were forced to ask permission to urinate and defecate, or to use a bucket inside the cell in which they were incarcerated. They had to request authorization to perform even the most basic tasks. Food, as well as being meager and of poor quality, was transformed into a sort of privilege for those who were considered well behaved. Any activity, even the most trivial, was regulated by the authorities. Often, detainees were forced to behave like animals, imitating the sounds of dogs or cows and crawling on all fours, or to go to the restroom blindfolded, where they would stumble into walls or doors, among other forms of humiliation.

This loss of control of bodily needs, which are regulated externally by the perpetrator, was compounded by the spatial and temporal disorientation mentioned earlier and the constant terror that torture could be resumed.

5. Unpredictability

Finally, there was the impossibility of knowing how to save oneself. The ultimate fate—death—was both suggested and hidden. The manner in which behavior was evaluated was whimsical and indecipherable. In some cases torture lasted weeks; in others, only a few days. In some cases, collaboration was rewarded with death; in others, it brought certain privileges. Sometimes, acts of solidarity or defiance were punished with death or a visit to the torture chamber; but on rare occasions, they were tolerated and even respected.

This contributed to the breakdown of personality, as various witnesses have testified, since it made it impossible to foresee the consequences of one's actions. Any action or inaction could result in death, but there was no pattern. Death was always just around the corner and, in the long term, seemingly inevitable; however, it was rationed in an arbitrary fashion like the food, and—in the Argentine camps—even suicide was prevented.

In many cases, the prisoners' loss of previous identity and stable references and disconnection from their own feelings and perceptions—even from their own bodies—led to a complete breakdown of personality. Recalling his experiences in the Buchenwald concentration camp, Bruno Bettelheim describes a figure that epitomizes the camp system even more than the living dead—namely, the “adapted” man. This was a person who had accepted some or all of the perpetrators' values. An extreme example was the prisoner functionary, or *kapo*, appointed by the Nazis to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks in the camp. Most *kapos* behaved with extreme brutality toward other prisoners. In the Argentine concentration camps, the “adapted” could be asked to torture their companions or to work at detecting and identifying new victims to be brought in for interrogation.¹⁷

But, as Pilar Calveiro, Carlos Flaskamp, the Association of Ex-Disappeared Detainees, and dozens of other witnesses point out, such cases accounted for

only a minority of those who underwent destruction. “Adaptation” was encouraged both inside and outside the concentration camps even though it did not often go as far as direct collaboration or the transformation of the victims into perpetrators. Its purpose was perhaps simpler: the erasing of the rebelliousness or solidarity among the survivors of the camps and—more fundamentally—in society at large.

The Limits of “Adaptation”: The Adapted, the Dissemblers, and the “Living Dead”

Imitating the perpetrators’ gestures, behaviors, topics of conversation, and value systems was a prerequisite for survival in a concentration camp. Inmates needed to avoid drawing attention, and—even more importantly—they needed to cultivate “adiaphorization,” or moral indifference to everything they saw. They became indifferent not only to what happened to themselves, but also to their peers, many of whom were no longer there the next day because they had been killed, “deported,” or “transferred,” while the rest continued to be subjected to torture, abuse, degradation, and humiliation. And each day, new detainees arrived to undergo the terrible period of “initiation”: torture, interrogation, degradation, and humiliation.

Survivors of the Nazi and Argentine camps describe three basic types of adapting:

1. *Total adaptation*, that is to say, acceptance of the perpetrators’ values. Argentine survivors describe these people as “going over to the enemy camp.” In the Nazi concentration camps, they became kapos, collaborators, and informants. In Argentina, they were especially good at torturing and interrogating former colleagues or at carrying out street sweeps for urban militants.¹⁸ Often, this “adaptation” resulted from an inability to endure torture; but sometimes it was simply a product of the concentration camp situation. Terror was enough to gain acquiescence without the need for physical pain.
2. *Dissembling*. Because the main purpose of concentration camps was to destroy the inmates’ personality, it was impossible to survive without accepting to some extent the values the perpetrators sought to instill. A significant difference in the Argentine case was the use of internment to extract information, but this rarely lasted beyond the first ten days. Therefore, the only way to resist and to survive was to adapt outwardly to these values, while resisting them internally. This behavior implied a huge psychological cost, because it required a high degree of schizophrenia to convince the perpetrators of a transformation that really did not exist, or at least did not exist to the extent the perpetrators expected or assumed.

It also required a very careful assessment of the *limits of collaboration*, to distinguish at what point adaptation was real and not merely a pretense.

A prototypical case of such behavior was shown by the “staff” of the ESMA Navy Mechanics School. As part of the navy’s recovery scheme for detainees, Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, a leading participant in the 1976 coup, formed two work teams: one was to develop intelligence leading to new abductions and to guarantee the political continuity of the genocide; the other was to analyze and evaluate national and international policy information, with the aim of creating a political force capable of guaranteeing the continuity of the dictatorship in an eventual transition to democracy. Both groups—the “mini-staff” for intelligence work and the “staff” for political tasks—were made up of supposedly rehabilitated prisoners—in other words, “adapted” prisoners who had accepted the values of their victimizers.

For the mini-staff, dissembling was impossible, because prisoners were required to destroy the very people with whom they had been militants. But the job of the “staff” was to read press cuttings, write political reports, and photocopy and adulterate public or private documents, depending on their technical or professional competence. This allowed for an interplay between verifiable “rehabilitation” and prisoners’ actions to the point where some victims effectively changed sides psychologically as well.

Dissembling placed prisoners in a permanent state of tension. They could pay with their lives for the slightest sign that betrayed their schizophrenia. Or they could be degraded to the lower echelons of camp life, which would mean renewed visits to the torture chamber, humiliation, and loss of privileges, such as slightly better food or a visit to the family. Moreover, the prisoners felt compelled to analyze each act of “collaboration” in minute detail in order to determine how useful it would be to the perpetrators and to what extent it made the prisoner the perpetrators’ accomplice.

Mario Villani, who was interned in various concentration camps in Argentina, suffered one of many dilemmas when he was ordered to repair one of the instruments with which the perpetrators tortured their victims—the *picana* or cattle prod used to give electric shocks, a torture which Villani himself had suffered repeatedly. At first, Villani refused to carry out this task. However, instead of punishing him for his disobedience, the perpetrators simply turned to using more primitive instruments—such as metal objects plugged directly into the power supply—which inflicted much greater pain and physical harm. This persuaded Villani to repair the instrument of torture.¹⁹

Villani’s dilemma illustrates indeed a permanent tension suffered by “dissemblers”: the extent to which adaptation can be resisted by the dissembler’s deeper psychic structure.

3. "*Living dead.*" As mentioned earlier, total adaptation would mean surrendering all remaining autonomy, making it impossible for the victims to stay alive on their own. And indeed, unable to accept their captors' values or to endure the tension of dissembling, the living dead let themselves die. Their will to live was paralyzed by the camp situation. In this state, malnutrition, overcrowding, disease, and degradation undermined the victim's power of resistance and, although their bodies held out for a while, led to absolute subjective extinction.

Inside and Outside the Camps

As I have already argued, the real purpose of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany (and later in Nazi-occupied Europe) as well as in Argentina was to reshape society. Even if most people never set foot in one, the camps sent a message of terror to those tempted to think for themselves.

The prototype of the Nazi concentration camp was Dachau. Located on the site of an abandoned munitions factory about ten miles northwest of Munich, it was opened in March 1933, barely a month after the Nazis took office. Heinrich Himmler, then the police chief of Munich, described it as "the first concentration camp for political prisoners."²⁰ At first, it mainly housed political prisoners—communists, social democrats, trade unionists, and other political opponents of the Nazi regime. Over time, other groups were also interned at Dachau, such as Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma (Gypsies), and homosexuals, as well as so-called asocials and repeat criminal offenders. The camp's message, however, was addressed to the entire German population as a disciplinary warning about the consequences of defying authority or displaying the slightest sign of political, social, or cultural autonomy.

The Nazis covered Germany with these camps and, when war broke out in 1939, hundreds more were set up in the occupied territories, with many smaller subcamps attached to them.²¹ It is calculated that approximately 15,000 labor, death, and concentration camps were built, although the exact figure remains uncertain.²² The six extermination camps tend to overshadow the key role played by thousands of concentration camps scattered throughout Europe as a strategy of social discipline.

In Argentina, more than 500 concentration camps and detention centers were distributed up and down the country. As in Nazi Germany, there was at least one camp within fifty miles of every major city so that the whole of society was trapped in a giant web of horror. As in Nazi Germany, it is not yet clear how many people were interned in these camps and centers. I do not mean those who died in them—most of these victims have now been identified—but we still do not know how many people were held for a day or two, maybe a week, and then returned to social life.²³ Nearly every day, a new survivor appears.

Poorer Argentines did not even realize they had been inside a concentration camp, so accustomed were they to being mistreated during police raids and interrogations.²⁴

To sum up, the camps performed a number of simultaneous functions: they eliminated social and political resistance; they dehumanized inmates as a way of justifying and legitimizing genocide; they disciplined and regulated society through terror—a terror of the unknown as well as the known, based on rumors that awakened fantasies and tapped into people’s innermost fears; a terror that bred suspicion toward those victims who “reappeared”—cutting them off from the social whole and spreading distrust among the population. This defensive attitude trapped the individual within the worldview of individualism, closing off the possibility of political action, solidarity, or cooperation.

At the same time, creating feelings of helplessness through terror was an essential strategy for silencing protest in Argentine society. The disparity between the two sides in terms of strength if not numbers—and, more significantly, the discourses built around the overwhelming nature of this “disparity”—brought political actions in Argentina to a halt. Why argue, why fight, why confront an opponent if every battle, every confrontation, is hopeless?²⁵ Feelings of indignation at injustice were expressed at a theoretical level, without any sort of practical application. Condemnation of injustice was at the level of abstract principle, rather than through attempts to change or transform reality—attempts that were considered doomed to failure.

This logic of helplessness functioned—and still functions—as an underground discourse in a society that had undergone the horror of genocide. As mentioned before, Elsa Drucaroff has explored the possible meanings of the words “Never Again.” One of the implicit questions she addresses is: “What never again?” The phrase does not include a response but one of its underground, hidden meanings, never made explicit, is powerlessness: “We will never again be able to challenge the social order.”

Defeat and Confusion: The Logic of Psychological Destruction

The perpetrators sought to produce “adaptive” behavior both inside and outside the camps, although the procedure was different in each case. One of the fundamental reasons why people tried to “adapt” *outside* the camps was because defeat came to be redefined in terms of failure, so future struggle seemed pointless. This subjective feeling of devastation destroyed the personality, transforming political or politico-military defeat into compliance and creating a state of mental “confusion.”²⁶

The “symbolic enactments” of genocide are the ways in which this confusion is expressed. Defeat is resignified as the logical and inevitable end to any confrontation with the hegemonic order. The struggle is then understood

as a mistake. “It was all a mistake, a silly, crazy provocation.” Hence the distinctive tone of many works written during the 1980s and 1990s. As mentioned in chapter 7, these works bristle with harsh epithets—messianic, delusional, irrational, deluded, scatological, sinister, proud, and dozens more synonyms—which are used to describe the radicalized militants of the pregenocide and genocide periods. Most of these authors had little personal involvement in the story they are trying to tell, and some show considerable “confusion” about their own identity. They do not feel part of a defeated generation but of a generation that went “wrong,” and this denial prevents them from understanding history, in general, and their own personal experiences of the past, in particular.

The difference between defeat and denial is an important one. The defeated do not necessarily deny their past: they can analyze it in an attempt to understand their own limitations and circumstances and to learn from their mistakes. In this sense, defeat is a great teacher. Basically, when a defeat is understood as such, it encourages us to analyze our battle situations and causes of defeat, to improve or transform our tools and methods, and keep on fighting. Defeat is often the mother of victory, and no social reorganization is final, not even one founded on genocide.

By contrast, “confusion” paralyzes us in a similar or complementary way to terror. Individuals who are confused do not know what to do in life. They deny the meaning of their actions and the principles upon which these are based. They understand their struggle as futile and their defeat as unnecessary. Naively, they would like to turn back the clock in an attempt to recover the dead, the annihilated. They accept the genocidal guilt, a guilt that does not belong to them. The logic of this discourse is that if there had been no struggle, there would have been no deaths.

There is no way of proving this counterfactual argument. On the contrary, Argentina’s so-called National Reorganization Process not only sought but *needed* to destroy preexisting social ties in order to impose a new economic and social order. Moreover, it is next to impossible to find any historical indicators that would show that *less* political conflict, *less* radical social struggles, or even *less* willingness to resort to political violence would have prevented the killing or at least modified the objectives of Argentina’s genocidal perpetrators.

The fact is that terror and death played a central role in the National Reorganization Process. The idea that the decision to commit genocide was implemented only after Argentina’s armed left began military actions—actions which, in any case, were not large enough to seriously challenge the power of the state or its monopoly of the use of force—ignores the genocidal consensus that had emerged after the bombing of Plaza de Mayo in June 1955. Argentina’s more conservative sectors were prepared to stop at nothing in order to dissolve the social bonds created—or at least consolidated—by the

emergence of Peronism as a social phenomenon. To argue that the policy of annihilation is rooted in the actions of Argentina's armed left is not only naive but, more seriously, it legitimizes genocide. Neither the operational capability of these forces nor the nature of the victims of genocide allows for such an interpretation.

But transforming "defeat" into a "mistake," denying the rebellious and critical spirit of those years, assuming that all political struggle is useless because it may end in genocide, and secretly accepting the brave "reorganized" new world as the only one possible—something which, for better or worse, must be accepted and digested—is simply to enact the multiple meanings of the phrase "never again." For "never again horror and death" also means "never fight again; never criticize or rebel again; never show solidarity again or feel moral responsibility for those who suffer." The genocidal power remains intact, so the only way to ensure "never again horror and death" is by guaranteeing we will "never again" make the mistake of believing we can challenge the status quo, of imagining that other social relations are possible, and of falling into the "naivety," "hallucinations," and "messianic delusions" of radical militancy.

With their utopias dead but not buried—their ideals tortured and destroyed in the camps and then "disappeared"—many members of the defeated generation, confused by terror and genocide, were all ready to cling to any wreckage they could find after the maelstrom had subsided. Thus they became an easy prey to individualism, selfish "careerism," and other postmodern religions.

And now I would like to point out once again that we cannot hope to understand the social divisions and the corruption that pervaded Argentine society during the neoliberal Menem era of the 1990s except within a context of attempting to explain a defeat that is not understood as such. Such attempts are usually futile, incomplete, and fail to replace the sense of activist experience. They leave a bitter taste in the mouth, forcing former militants to ask themselves day after day where the limits of "adaptation" lie. Should we accept only the futility of political struggle, or must we also welcome the new neoliberal order? Will it be accepted as part of our new "tolerant" and "open" identity if we share a round-table discussion with an unpunished genocidaire, or should we only talk to his accomplices? And how should we react to an invitation to reconciliation? With whom can we be "reconciled" in such circumstances?

In his book on mental hospitals, Erving Goffman distinguished four coping strategies used by inmates to adapt to the institutional situation. These strategies, he claimed, applied equally to other total institutions like prisons. These are (1) *withdrawal*, also known in psychiatric institutions as "regression"; (2) *intransigence*, whereby inmates confront hospital or prison staff or refuse to cooperate; (3) *colonization*, whereby inmates settle into a routine and make the best of the privileges available; and (4) *conversion*, whereby inmates come to see themselves through the eyes of the institution and take on the role of the

perfect inmate.²⁷ Conversion was also studied by Bettelheim, who was particularly interested in the ways the inmates of concentration camps come to adopt the values of their victimizers.

But attempts at “conversion,” either in society in general or within a concentration camp, are always problematic. Converts, whether religious, political, or ideological, are generally not accepted by anyone. The constant pressure to prove that their newfound faith is more profound and more radical than the next person’s only increases their *state of confusion*. In addition, their old ideas cling to them like a second nature they cannot get rid of. The idea of starting a process of dialogue with their former enemies is too loathsome for words—not even if the perpetrators went down on their hands and knees.

Many would-be converts are unable to make the moral leap and remain mired in confusion. Midway in their conversion, they cannot come to terms with their own history. They cannot establish a pleasurable relationship with the past, which they now deny, but they are not accepted by their former enemies, either.

Understanding this process is essential if we are to challenge the logic of genocidal and postgenocidal social reorganization. Converts, in spite of everything, are not perpetrators. They are victims, even though it is difficult to see them as such, particularly in moral terms. Converts, however, are confused victims who cannot accept themselves as such, or who can only see themselves as victims in the past or in abstract terms. They blame their own rebellious spirit (mistakenly or futilely rebellious, from their point of view). Those victims who are occasionally able to recognize that they are *still* victims can only do so in the abstract. They continue to experience a deep need to deny their previous identity—an identity once expressed through a characteristic synthesis of being and doing. Just as society feels caught between “two demons,” these victims confuse their aggressors with their victimized peers, or blame an irrational violence that supposedly took hold of both sides in the political struggle.

It is not possible for a society to work through the trauma of genocide unless it sees genocide as a profound defeat—one it must question, examine, understand, and learn from. We must try to make peace with our dead, not as heroes or martyrs, saints or angels, and certainly not as “delusional youngsters” or “youths fascinated by violence,” but as a generation that believed in a more just and egalitarian society. A generation that embodied a utopian way of life and made many mistakes, but also produced some achievements. A generation that was defeated, and whose survivors have much to ask themselves, but also much to teach and pass on to future generations. Nothing more and nothing less.

Simultaneously, those of us who belong to a later generation need to help these survivors overcome their confusion—for our sake as much as theirs. Together, we need to leave behind the concentration camp experience—the

bouillon cube and soup—and understand (again) that Argentina’s current social structure is not the only one possible and that not every struggle needs to end in genocide. We must remember that the whole purpose of annihilation was to prevent us from speaking out and conveying our experiences. Annihilation was intended to stop us thinking, discussing, or evaluating what has happened to us.

Mass murder itself does not, of itself, impose these symbolic enactments. The two processes are connected, but separable. Deaths are necessary but never sufficient for the closure of social relations. Without us, closure is not possible; in us, closure will always find a limit. Maybe the time has come for these “symbolic enactments” to cease.

Resistance and “Lines of Flight”

Reflecting on the systems of power and domination that control even our most private activities, Foucault noted that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather, consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”²⁸ This principle proved to be true in both Argentina’s concentration camps and the country’s “social soup.” In both cases, small and—for the most part—scattered pockets of resistance and solidarity sprang up, with the possibility of becoming poles of counterhegemony capable of challenging the notion of genocidal reorganization as normal or legitimate.

Foucault notes that

these points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, or pure law of the revolutionary. . . . Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat.²⁹

Numerous survivors’ testimonies describe gestures of solidarity. Papiernik tells how prisoners in Auschwitz tried to save those sicker or more starved than themselves from the gas chambers by wearing their companions’ numbers and running outdoors for them in the cold. They had to run the same distance twice even though they barely had the strength to do so once. Then there were those who shared or gave away their bread ration even though they themselves were little more than skin and bone, and those who spread rumors of impending liberation to bolster hope.³⁰

Other testimonies mention countless acts of sabotage. Sobibor extermination camp was closed after a rebellion that ended in the escape and flight of around 300 of its 600 prisoners, about 50 of whom avoided recapture. Similarly, there were occasional escapes from the Argentine detention centers. But just as important for prisoners' morale were the many small gestures of recognition and support they managed to exchange with other prisoners—for example, a wink or a pat on the arm. These little signs restored prisoners' self-esteem and their sense of being a person. Organizing conversations or rhythmic percussive hand claps to shatter the silence and overcome loneliness were other small but glorious ways of ceasing to be “walled up.”

Jorge Paladino, a survivor of one of the Argentine concentration camps, tells how, with his bunk mate, “before going to sleep each night we walked 20 to 30 blocks and bought an ice cream on the corner of Tellier and Rivadavia Street. We discussed politics and religion.”³¹ Other testimonies narrate imaginary movie screenings, narrated by an inmate, or clandestine history classes. These innumerable, sometimes almost indistinguishable, actions, which Goffman calls “secondary adjustments”—that is, small but unauthorized ways of side-stepping assumptions about what one should do and therefore what one should be—allowed prisoners to re-find their own identity and avoid depersonalization.

Pablo Pozzi and Ricardo Falcón have also pointed out the many labor disputes under the military dictatorship despite strikes being banned. IKA-Renault, General Motors, Mercedes Benz, and Chrysler in 1976 and state-owned companies and textile mills throughout the period were the scenes of numerous confrontations and several deaths but also of small successes that undermined the policies of the dictatorship. These disputed successes are either forgotten or denied in most accounts of the period.³²

This is not to say that the dictatorship's methods of dissuasion were not brutally effective. It is simply to point out that even in the worst conditions, certain people managed, in one way or another, to preserve their self-esteem together with a sense of solidarity, concern, and responsibility for others. Some workers *were* able to resist even though persecution was especially intense in the factories. Now, thirty years after the end of the dictatorship, with a new generation of young people entering political life for the first time, surely we should be able to throw off the yoke of terror once and for all.

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Need to Remove the Social Blindfolds

Death, by definition, is irreversible. As much as we wish otherwise, those who embodied a particular way of life will never reappear. In contrast, symbolic processes are dynamic and reversible. Despite leaving deep scars, they *can* be transformed. If we remember that concentration camps and genocide were

devised as political instruments to transform the social whole, a concentration camp analogy can help us understand how these scars remain with us today. For genocide has not only succeeded in creating psychological “walls” between Argentineans; it has blindfolded and hoodwinked us into believing we have no power of self-determination, no ability to dream or to imagine rebellion or a rebellious attitude. Nevertheless, the marches, demonstrations, and public debates that began in 1996 with the twentieth anniversary of the military coup suggest that some members of society have slowly begun to peek out from beneath their blindfolds.

Symbolic walls are more difficult to build than physical partitions, and they are also more difficult to remove.³³ I have already argued that a dialogue is needed between the generation that lived through the genocide and those generations that came afterward. I will go further: only a collective elaboration of Argentina’s past—one that accepts both the pain of loss and the need to analyze defeat—can remove our blindfolds and make the walls come tumbling down. At a political level, this will allow us to own our past, to know where we come from, and to dream and plan for a better future without a bandage over our eyes.