

Collective Traumatic Memories of Political Forced Disappearance in the Aftermath of Uruguay's State Terror (1973-1985)

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ABSTRACT

My essay provides points for analytic reflection on how collective memories of traumatic experiences after state terror endured to be transmitted in the context of a human rights policy of public silencing of state abuses. I present some reflections from my case study of Uruguay's "problem of the disappeared," political detainees disappeared during the period of state terror under Uruguay's military regime (1973-1984), in the context of transitional human rights policies of oblivion (1985-2001).

The reflections I summarize here are based on ethnographic research I have conducted since the late 1990s of private transmissions of the experience of disappearance in Uruguay in the context of transitional politics of "reconciliation" based on oblivion and public silencing. My case analysis highlights the political and cultural consequences of underlying conflicts that remain unacknowledged in the public after violent political conflict, and I offer notions towards building a sociological understanding of collective trauma. Trauma, what I here call "haunting pasts," is seen here as a result of an unresolved, unprocessed past that remains woven into the fabric of the nation's contemporary culture and politics. I argue that these "haunting pasts" were unintended effects of a national process of denial, epitomized in public "policies of oblivion," where state crimes remained unacknowledged and un-mourned. Such experiences remained and slowly simmered in the undercurrents of collective memory, sustained in the shelter of the private and intimate, everyday realms of individual and interpersonal, familial communications and subjectivities, among the communities touched directly by the era of state terror.

Introduction

Repressive political regimes worldwide have attempted to control not only the institutions of memory and history making after political violence but also their sources: ordinary people's collective capacity to remember and transmit the violent past.

Since the Nuremberg trials following World War II, movements have been steadily growing for the rights of memory of and state accountability for gross human rights abuses in war, genocide, apartheid, and authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. From Spain to South-Africa and Eastern Europe, East Timor and Peru, and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq, victims have pushed for public redress and against the denial and forgetting of their suffering, a suffering that has been increasingly framed in terms of traumatic experience.

The present paper reflects on similar processes in the Uruguayan case, within the context of post-authoritarian Latin American transitional politics. Uruguay's legacy of memory and trauma under post-authoritarian human rights policies is used as a lens to analyze some of the complex cultural processes of what may be called the collective dimension of traumatic remembering in their intersection with state policy and state political violence.

I first briefly introduce Uruguay's context. In the context of the U.S.-led Cold War Era "National Security Doctrine" (NSD)¹ war against "communist subversion" in the 1970s, disappearance,² long-term prison and torture, and exile became emblematic tools

¹ See Blixen 1998, Dinges 2003, and Landau 1988.

² Disappearance refers to the illegal abduction by state agents (usually military or police units or undercover intelligence officers) of citizens suspected of oppositional political activism. Disappearance has been typified as a permanent crime and as a crime against humanity in international humanitarian law. See

of state terror. As the Uruguayan state waged its particular form of war against “subversion” in the 1970s, its military unleashed political violence against its own citizens, un-paralleled in the history of this nation.

In the dictatorship’s aftermath, Uruguay’s transitional regime and society dealt with the legacies of state terror by implementing one of the most extreme policies in the region of denial and silencing of state human rights abuses of the dictatorship, now known as Uruguay’s “Policies of Oblivion” (1985-2001). Instituted in the name of reconciliation, these policies denied human rights victims any public recognition or redress, effectively silencing public debate about the fate of the disappeared, the tortured, or the exiled.

The cornerstone of the Uruguayan transitional policy was a 1986 statute of limitations officially named *Ley de Caducidad (or Expiry Law)*.³ The law absolved all military and police personnel from any crimes committed during the military regime without any prior investigations or due process, and it was aimed at turning the page and “sealing the past” (the expression at the time).

While the policies initially seemed to have successfully wrapped the public memory of the abuses under a mantle of silence, within a decade the political landscape started changing. After barely a decade, the memory and movements for memory and accountability for these abuses resurfaced.

The unresolved “problems of the past” started to show through the cracks in the walls of silence and oblivion in the form of growing, rather than weaning, public interest

International Covenant against Forced Disappearance, 1994; and San Jose de Costa Rica Accords, Inter-American Court of Justice, 1992. For further description of the crime, its origins, and its implications, see Feitlowitz’s brilliant work (1998).

³ In the Spanish Original, “*Caducidad de la Pretension Punitiva del Estado*, literally the “Law Abrogating the Punitive Claim of the State” (for translation of the law’s name, see Brito 1997).

and demands. The very endurance of these public questions and demands through decades of public efforts by elites and social institutions to suppress them is the very heart of the matter to examine, theoretically and empirically. How do collective memories endure to be transmitted under public repression?

I here summarize reflections based on ethnographic research (documented elsewhere, see Fried UCLA dissertation 2004). I here highlight the underlying conflicts as a result of an unacknowledged, unprocessed past that remains woven into the fabric of the nation's contemporary culture, politics and social relations and sensibilities.

At the heart of my argument lies the following insight: what public political memory excluded for decades was paradoxically sustained and "revived," so to speak, in the cultural intimate sphere of the private, familial transmissions. Such cultural processes made it possible for the collective memory to be re-constructed and be made readily available to the popular political culture decades later. I here conceptualize a formative layer of *undercurrents of private memories* across generations.

The Problem and its Context: State Terror and Transitional Politics of Oblivion

The Uruguayan case highlights how the "waves of memory" put into evidence the underlying conflicts of the unresolved past, still present, woven into the fabric of the contemporary culture and politics. These are effects of unprocessed, un-mourned experience that slowly simmered in the undercurrents of collective memory, occupying subjective and intersubjective spaces in everyday relationships of individuals, families and communities touched by state repression.

What had been excluded in the public memory paradoxically had retained a profound social and cultural presence, and was finally pushing its way back from the

private into the cultural and spilling over into the public political culture. This is what I conceptualize as the formative layer of *undercurrents of intimate memories* of the political repression, transmitted among the “communities of memory” of the families of the disappeared across generations.

Officials had counted on the power of time, thinking it was on their side--with the passing of time and of the last survivors and witnesses, they thought the last remnants of the troubling past would be erased. Ultimately, the policies of denial and silencing did not achieve the expected social reconciliation or closure. Under the thin varnish of consensus, polarizations endured. Over time, publics became increasingly aware that the past was not only *not past*, but was increasingly *more present*, as periodic cycles of public debate and contestation resurfaced and broke the silence in national civic debates over the state’s responsibility and accountability for the human rights abuses.

2. The Transmission of the Memories of Disappearance in Uruguay

I attempt to build notions of traumatic remembering towards a social, cultural and collective-level concept. I draw heavily on Prager’s (2004, 2004b) works on trauma, mourning and temporality (see also Prager 2003, 1999, Volkan 2000). My starting point is Kai Erikson’s (1976) classic definition of collective trauma, where trauma is seen as a blow to the community’s solidarity and sense of community that manifests belatedly over time, and build on more recent approaches in the social sciences and the humanities that have moved towards a notion of trauma which lies *not in the events themselves* but rather

in their *constructed cultural meanings* as a result of processes of subjective and collective *retrospective reconstruction* (Caruth 1995; Prager 1999, 2003, 2004, see also Alexander and Smelser 2003) which understand traumatic memory as a culturally mediated, socially embedded and intersubjectively embodied process. I highlight the following notions towards a multilayered definition:

1) **Trauma as un-metabolized past:** My work build on the tradition that it is not only the *nature* of the events that may be traumatic, but also the ways by which subjects and collectivities *experience* them and give them *meaning* in specific socio-historical contexts. I highlight the processual, cultural and meaning-making as well as intersubjective and embodied aspects towards a sociological notion of trauma after political violence. In my study traumatic process appears symptomatically in the “waves of memory” mentioned above, seen as un-metabolized memories of a past which comes to be re-experienced repetitively as if frozen in time.

2) **Trauma as Un-mourned Loss:**

A sociological notion of trauma implies a theory of the subjective and intersubjective experience of loss, grief, and of how they are processed and mourned. The mourning process requires both a *subject*, a mourner in pain who grieves, as well as *an external world* where the loss and mourning is constituted (Prager 2004). From the perspective of the mourning process and ritual, trauma can be understood a failure of the social environment to provide protection against a world experienced as harmful (Prager 2004). According to this understanding, trauma is not the mere result of an individual’s pathology but also the result of a failed social process which provides no solutions for mourning losses and emotional closure (Prager 2004: 3). The case study here was a

traumatic process not only actively perpetrated by particular agents (the state), but was sustained by the social, political, and cultural conditions and institutions (the policies of terror and of ongoing denial) that made it possible. In this sense, trauma is not a pathological psychic process that happens within individuals, a distortion of the individual subject's memory—although it may present itself that way. Trauma is not the individual subject's own doing, not even a dyadic doing between perpetrator and victim.

3) Trauma as a form of alternative moral accountability in a system of social insurance:

Traumatic memories distort the present and severely affect the future. To use Ricoeur's image (1999), traumatic memories "carry a weight of the past to be faced in the future" (1999: 94). Trauma here is seen as a ghost that "still inhabits the present" and besieges the living without letting them get any distance (41). It is a past that cannot recede and carries duties which "paralyze memory, and by extension, its capacity to project creatively into the future" (62).

Many of my interviewees, those afflicted by the trauma of political repression in Uruguay, have described this weight or anchor as a duty that has changed their lives and ways of being, of experiencing and perceiving reality. For example, a mother whose son had disappeared told me about her task in life that reflected the life ethics of the community: "I consider it a duty, that's why we go on (...) I think of my [missing] son, and think: how wouldn't I continue to do something for him?"

Another mother said: "What happened can *never happen again*. (...) That is how this [memory] becomes embodied in you, it *becomes part of your flesh*" [my italics].

Many of those who suffered disappearance, political prison, torture or exile during the dictatorship suggested that when society decided to forget and offered no solutions to the victims, it “condemned” them, the victims, to memory.

The moral obligation for survivors to remember became even stronger when the Uruguayan state tried not only to forget but to erase all trace of its violence to avoid accountability. Survivors under similar conditions worldwide seem to contract a powerful debt which obliges them to “count their denied dead” (Schmucler in Piralián 2000: 17). This moral debt or obligation transforms memory even more deeply into a form of moral accounting. Building on Mauss’ (1964) work anthropological work on “moral mutual obligations” and “social insurance,” I think of traumatic memory as a “moral economy” that reminds members of society of a social breakdown. I suggest in more detail in my paper that traumatic memory has the paradoxical effect of destroying and re-drafting social moral boundaries while at the same time reinforcing such mutual obligations.

4) The Inter-generational Transmission of Traumatic Experience in Memory.

My work also documents and corroborates clinical findings in trauma research that shown that after the onset of parental trauma, the second generation--or even a third--may come to experience vicarious traumatic memories (I extend this point further in my paper). My work suggests that the traumatizing effects over generations are especially aggravated under social conditions of ongoing public silence such as those under the politics of oblivion and impunity in Uruguay, where former victims endured unfavorable social conditions resulted in their ongoing traumatization well beyond the events themselves or the generations that suffered the repression directly.

Conclusion

The endurance and transmission across generations of a sense of unpaid debt emerged as a crucial element in the on-going “problem of the disappeared” in the Uruguayan case.

What emerged strongly throughout all my ethnographic work was how heavily this sense of pending obligations or legacy of “unfinished business” weighed in three generations (parents, peers, and children of the disappeared), wrapped in multiple and subtle layers of secrecy and silence.

Further comparative research will have to consider the following: If the legacy of disappearance is a memory that hands down debts, how are they to be settled? Are the next generations inevitably “condemned to memory”? How much of that burden will the second, third, fourth generation need carry?

What are the consequences for the future of such policies? Under what alternative social conditions, what public policy, could disappearance be mourned, symbolized, and worked through?

The evidence from the families I documented elsewhere (See Fried 2004) suggests that members of the second generation, far from forgetting or healing, are also struggling with the burdens of their past. The evidence in the national cultural and political landscape also strongly suggests that far from closure, the Politics of Oblivion extended the problem and delayed the transition’s tasks.

The evidence also suggests that direct “victims” and affected communities (however narrowly or widely defined) cannot mourn their losses and achieve a measure of closure on their own, not even as a generation or a community. This process of change will require not only of the passing of time but also the presence of a social “other,” a public witness who will listen empathetically and legitimize their experiences. Putting the stories and testimonies into narrative seemed a first step in a long process of redress.

The question remains, under what social and political conditions will the names of the disappeared and the words that narrate their stories be *spoken, heard, recognized*? And under what democratic process will such crimes be *accounted for*?

In this case of state repression, Uruguayan citizens were subjected to unprecedented levels of violence by a state that they traditionally had expected to be their source of welfare and protection, following long-held democratic traditions of the rule of law, consensus and trust in the welfare state and civil rights. In all levels of abuse there is a total collapse of the meaning systems that regulated social life and a perverse cultural reversal submerged the collective in a climate of intimidation and secrecy.

Under such a radical erasure of all institutional support, the damage cannot be addressed or repaired only at the level of individuals or families. The solution has to come from all the levels that jointly contributed to the silence and secrecy that enabled the escalation of violence up to the state crimes. Resolution will come only when the social as well as the political community can recognize the harm done and take steps to involve the whole community, the society and its institutions--political, judicial, social, educational and interpersonal--to heal the wounds and initiate changes in the culture of silence and insecurity to establish new boundaries between the past and the present.

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