

The Treatment of Children in the 'Dirty War': Ideology, State Terrorism, and the Abuse of Children in Argentina

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DEDICATION

To the memory of Juan Carlos Anzorena

Our task here is to decode the messages, both hidden and overt, in the historical rediscovery of torture in the Argentine chambers of death during the Argentine 'Dirty War.' In these ghastly texts, children emerge as valuable commodities to be strategically exploited in a demented 'dirty war' fought between the Security Forces and their phantom, demonic enemies.

The Sociohistorical Setting: The Path to the 'Dirty War'

In the 1970s the Argentine Republic began writing one of the darkest chapters in modern Latin American history. The first half of that decade was characterized by increasing terrorist violence against military and police officers, government officials, diplomats, journalists, industrialists, and intellectuals. The Argentine economy was collapsing. Extreme inflation rates made the Argentine peso a worthless currency. Unemployment soared. Labor unrest and strikes were daily occurrences. The National University of Buenos Aires became increasingly politicized, losing much of its prestige as a great institution for higher learning.

By the late sixties and early seventies high-ranking members of the military and police hier-

archies were kidnapped and/or assassinated in ultra-leftist terrorist operations almost weekly. For example, the chief of the Federal Police, Comisario Villar, a man with as much protection as any head of state, was killed by a bomb that exploded in his boat as he was quietly fishing one weekend. Ex-president [*de facto*] General Aramburo, was kidnapped and executed by a terrorist group, the so-called *Montoneros*, a seemingly unique blend of ultra-leftist internationalist and nationalist Peronists. The heads of major international companies in Buenos Aires were also targets of ultra-leftist terrorist attacks. In one such case the head of FIAT Buenos Aires, an Italian executive was kidnapped by a group of young terrorists in a dramatic operation. He was held for ransom for months and was eventually killed. The *Montoneros* also kidnapped a most influential agro-industrial family, the Born brothers and extracted a reported 60 million dollars for their freedom.

By the early 1970s ultra-rightist paramilitary organizations such as the 'Asociación Anticomunista Argentina' [AAA], began to systematically produce their own brand of terror. Union leaders were executed mid-day in downtown Buenos Aires. Leftists politicians were assassinated in one spectacular operation after another. World re-

nowned academics, such as Professor Silvio Frondisi, a self-described 'theoretical Marxist' and brother of the constitutional ex-president of the Republic, Arturo Frondisi, was kidnapped and executed in public. Journalists also became targets of fire from both the ultra-right and the ultra-left.

In brief, members of all sectors of the society were vulnerable to random flying bullets. The state could no longer monopolize the use of violence. The atmosphere of fear was like a thick fog. No one could feel safe, exempted. The killing became ever more pointless. Bodyguards were in high demand. Paying bribes to terrorist groups for immunity became common practice in the industrial sector. As Timerman reports, 'monthly sums were paid by companies to right-wing and left-wing organizations simultaneously to assure that their executives wouldn't be assassinated or kidnapped' (1981: 19).

The chaos reached its peak in early 1976 at the hands of Maria Estela ['Isabelita'] Martinez de Perón, then the constitutional President of the Argentine Republic. Terrorist attacks by highly dedicated and efficient groups of both ultra-leftist and ultra-rightist persuasion became daily events. The increasing discontent of the Argentine people with the *status quo*, set the stage for a military takeover of civilian institutions. When the military, promising 'order,' finally removed 'Isabelita' Perón from the *Casa Rosada* in March of 1976 'the entire country, including the Peronists, breathed a sigh of relief' (Timerman 1981: 26). Instead of order what ensued was one of the most brutal regimes known in a continent already noted for a long history of brutality.

The Argentine Armed Forces had not fought a war during the twentieth century. Historically modeled after Germanic ideals, the military has traditionally seen itself as an isolated entity of superior men entrusted with a historical duty to protect the 'fatherland' from foreign and, particularly, domestic enemies. According to Timerman (*ibid.*) the degree of the military's segregation from other sectors of the society is remarkable. For example, military men, Timerman notes, would only marry women from military families. A *caste-like* segregation of the military from the civilian order must be emphasized.

In the seventies, for the first time in its history, the military came under systematic and vicious attacks from highly efficient terrorist bands. It is important to keep this background in mind in

order to explore the subsequent emergence of the ideological matrix in which some very grotesque crimes against humanity were committed – including assaulting children and unborn fetuses with electrical prods. [...] After the March 1976 coup paramilitary gangs, known as *patotas*, began to operate much more visibly under the direct control of the security forces.

On the 24th of March, 1976, the Argentine military installed a *de facto* junta composed of the chiefs of its three branches: the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. The head of the Argentine Army, General Jorge Rafael Videla became the President of the Argentine Republic. Thus 'El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional' began [The Process of National Reorganization]. In brief, the self-stated objective of the junta was to 'reorganize' the Argentine nation. Their 'reorganizational' agenda is of critical importance to understand the fate of families and children in the context of the 'dirty war.' [...]

Upon the return to democracy in the early 1980s, following the disastrous adventure of the Argentine military in its attempt to take over the Malvinas Islands, the Argentine people began more fully to realize the extent of the crimes committed on the name of 'saving' the fatherland from leftist 'subversives.' Some victims who were allowed to survive told of their ordeals to the world. [For a moving account of his personal nightmare see Timerman 1981.] The Argentine people finally publicly confronted what the rest of the world had long suspected: that thousands of innocent Argentine citizens, including children, had been kidnapped, brutally tortured, and ruthlessly executed without any pretense at due process of law.

The military regime had responded to terrorist attacks of the left with one of the most grotesque examples of uncontrollable repression known in recent Western history. The state-controlled terrorist machinery assumed a life of its own. Death squads became autonomous units taking full initiative in seeking out victims. Clandestine detention camps had been set up in military, police, and other installations throughout the country to house and torment the kidnapped [see Amnesty International 1984: 143–5; Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas 1984, and Timerman 1981].

In December of 1983 the democratically elected government of President Raúl Alfonsín responded

to the public outcry of horror by creating the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas [CONADEP]. Prominent Argentines became members of the CONADEP. Ernesto Sabato was appointed the commission's president. Argentine scientists, congressmen, distinguished reporters, business and industry leaders, etc., also were members of the commission.

Their objective was to systematically document the nature and extent of the repression unleashed following the military take over of 1976. For months the commission received and recorded the painful testimony of those who for one reason or another had survived the ordeal of clandestine imprisonment. However, the degree collective fear is still so pervasive that the commission believes that even under present democratic rule the *relatives* of many 'disappeared' dare not come forth to relate their cases. In short, not all has yet been revealed.

The 20th of September 1985, the commission presented their report, entitled *Nunca mas* [Never Again], to President Raul Alfonsín. *Nunca Mas* is one of the important documents printed this decade. It presents a detailed, graphic view of a monstrous system for death.

The CONADEP report concluded that *at least* 8,960 citizens, including 127 children, remain 'disappeared' and should be considered dead (CONADEP 1984: 16). That is not counting the children that were kidnapped, systematically abused by the security forces and then returned to their relatives [see below]. I should point out that many regard the CONADEP estimate of 8,960 as much too conservative. Some argue that close to 15,000 persons were disappeared. The assault on children was so systematic that the *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo* [Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo] formed to find out and make public the savagery inflicted upon children and to help locate those still missing.

Security officers rationalized the necessity of the systematic savage torture 'sessions' as the only viable way to combat 'leftist terrorism' in an urban setting [see Timerman 1981; CONADEP 1984: 26-54; Amnesty International 1984: 143-5; *El Diario del Juicio* vols. I through XV; *The Economist* 1985: 37-8]. Yet, I emphasize that it is now generally agreed that most of the terrorists died in actual military confrontations with security forces, or committed suicide just prior to capture. In fact, by mid-1976 the terrorists could no longer

pose a serious military threat (see Cabeza 1985: 170). In brief, the majority of those brutalized by the repression were sought out and tormented after ultra-leftist violence had been exterminated.

Many of those latter victims were professionals from 'suspected occupations' such as psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, welfare workers, and journalists judged to be 'critical' of the regime [see CONADEP 1984: 293-441; Timerman 1981: 93-9]. The irony is that the military specifically sought out these professionals which Foucault (1979) considers to be the 'social regulators' which replaced jailers and torturers as consensus agents in post-nineteenth-century Europe. Foucault's model may explain the historical shift in European social control from focusing on the 'body' to the 'soul,' but it obviously fails to account for the recurrence of torture in the postcolonial world.

During the 'dirty war' attorneys working of behalf of 'disappeared' persons, themselves were made to 'disappear' [CONADEP 1984: 416-24]. Members of human rights groups working on behalf of 'disappeared' persons, themselves 'disappeared' [CONADEP 1984: 424-6]. Students and labor organizers were 'disappeared.' Other innocent civilians were kidnapped simply 'by mistake.' Dagmar Ingrid Hagelin, a 17-year-old Swedish tourist, was mistaken for a 'subversive.' She was kidnapped by security officers, tortured, and then was killed. Others were picked up, tortured, and 'disappeared' after an anonymous call to the security forces identified them as 'subversive.' No questions were asked. One such a call could mean a death sentence. The randomness characterizing the 'dirty war' was the key to the establishment of a collective fear.

At the peak of the nightmare entire families were kidnapped [see CONADEP 1984; Timerman 1981]. Pregnant women were kidnapped [see CONADEP 1984: 299-323]. Old men, in some cases over 70 years old, were kidnapped [see Timerman 1981: 143]. Children were kidnapped [see CONADEP, *ibid.*; Guthmann 1986: 23-4].

Children in the 'Dirty War'

Let us turn to a more systematic exploration of the various forms of use and abuse to which children were submitted to during the so-called 'dirty war.' In order to fully appreciate the meaning of the atrocities committed, as well as the contexts in

which these atrocities recur, we also briefly analyze the very nature of torture. Torture today continues to play a central role in the theatrics of political and religious orthodoxy [Amnesty International 1984, 1973; Bacry and Ternisien 1980]. State sponsored torture is an old and widespread phenomenon [see for example Mellor 1961; Tomas y Valiente 1973; Ruthven 1978; Foucault 1979]. We will explore the meaning of the torturers' assault on children and the family unit in the context of the 're-organizational' fantasies of the *Reorganización Nacional* junta. After delineating the anatomy of terror, and its uses for social control, we turn to explore the ideological blueprint by means of which the atrocities occurred. In certain historical contexts and armed with totalizing ideological agendas human beings have shown themselves to be capable of treating other human beings most atrociously. Yet to understand the degree of the madness created in the Argentine torture chambers, we need to explore how a collective delusion could be mobilized in the creation, and subsequent exorcism, of the demonic 'subversive.' Finally, we turn to a consideration of the instrumental aspects of state sponsored terrorism and abuse as a form of political discourse.

Alicia B. Morales de Galanba related the following case to the CONADEP:

I lived in Mendoza with my children, Paula Natalia and Mauricio. They were a year and a half and two months old. My friend, Maria Luisa Sanchez de Vargas and her two children Josefina, a five year old, and Soledad, a one and a half year old, also lived with us.

On the 12th of June, 1976 at about 11PM, Maria Luisa and I were in the kitchen when we heard knocks and suddenly saw our kitchen invaded by a group of men. Before we could even realize what was going on, they beat us to the floor and blind-folded us. With all the screaming and noise, the children woke up and began crying frantically. The men searched and destroyed each room of the house. As they proceeded, they repeatedly asked me where my husband was. They would also stop and click their weapons as if they were going to kill us. The terror was already within us and would not let me breathe. It was a terror that grew with the crying of the little children, increasingly more dementing.

When we could Maria Luisa and I took the children in our arms and tried to calm them down. After about twenty minutes or so, they took us out of the house and shoved us in to a car, probably a Ford. They took

us to a place I was later to recognize as Mendoza's Police Headquarters. They put us in an empty room and they took away my two month old baby, Mauricio. I felt that my world was collapsing. I did not wish to live. I soon stopped even crying. I threw myself in the floor and remained in a fetal position. After several hours they returned my two month old baby, Mauricio. Slowly I began to recuperate. For the next two days we kept all four children with us. Josefina and Paula could not tolerate being locked up. They cried constantly, kicking the door, and asking the jailer to let us go.

Then one of the jailers took Josefina [the 5-year-old] away. Again we felt aware of the terror. We did not know what they wanted to do with the little girl. About two hours later they returned her to us. Josefina told us that they had taken her to the bus terminal to identify people. A while after they came by and took all four children away from us. Eventually the children were taken back to their respective grandparents. After that, they separated Maria Luisa and I, though we were both kept at the same installation. One day the jailer told me that they were going to bring Maria Luisa to my cell. I was happy that I would see her again, although I feared what I would see.

Indeed Maria Luisa was another person. The pain she had suffered made her age. She told me in tears that through a prostitute she was able to see her husband, Jose Vargas, soon after we had been separated. He is now disappeared. When they saw each other Jose told his wife that their daughter, Josefina, was taken to witness a torture session. They had made her witness his torture so that he would talk. This must have been between the 12th and 14th of June, after they took Josefina from our cell. But Maria Luisa's story did not end there. What I heard next was so horrible that even today I feel like I felt then, that of all the tragedies a person may live through, nothing could be worse than this... Maria Luisa next told me that a few days before, she was taken to her parents house, in San Juan. She said that she really thought that it was to give her parents the pleasure of seeing that she was alive and to make her renew contact with her girls. Then she said: 'But no, instead they took me to a funeral. And you know whose? It was the funeral of my daughter, Josefina,' the five year old. When Maria Luisa asked her father, Dr. Sanchez Sarmiento, a federal attorney, how such a thing happened, he told her that a few days after arriving to their house, the girl took a weapon from her grandfather's drawer and shot herself. [CONADEP 1984: 319-20]

During the years of terror after March of 1976 the children of those who were suspected of 'subversive activities' became victims of brutal and systematic abuse. Today 127 children remain 'unaccounted for,' or in the Argentine vocabulary of terror, *desaparecidos* [see CONADEP 1984: 299-323]. Other children were kidnapped, brutalized, and then returned to relatives. As in Josefina's case, the children were often picked up by security officers in the course of capturing the parents [see Slavin 1985: 1-7]. In some cases, if lucky, the children were allowed to remain behind, at times to stay at home all alone through the night. In other cases children were taken to a neighbor who was told to keep them and to keep quiet. Other children died in captivity [see CONADEP 1984: 99-323].

Children became very valuable pawns in the psychotic war that engulfed Argentina into the early 1980s. There is widespread evidence that children were brought into torture sessions to witness how a parent was tortured with electroshocks, drowning, burning, etc. (CONADEP 1984: 99-323). This is what they did to Josefina, a 5-year-old. She could only erase the atrocities she witnessed by killing herself soon after witnessing the grotesque spectacle involving her father.

Children were tortured in front of the parents commonly to make the adults 'talk,' sign a confession, or to implicate others in 'subversive activities.' CONADEP reports a number of such cases [see CONADEP 1984: 20 and 299-323]. The torture of small children, particularly in front of their parents, had been systematic. For example, a doctor who was detained and put to work in a military hospital reported that a renowned torturer was very interested in finding out from medical experts how big would a child need to be to survive systematic electric shocks. The torturer asked a military physician, another renowned torturer, 'how much should a child weigh before we can torture him. Vidal [the Doctor] responded "after 25 kilos you can run electrical charges through their bodies"' [El Diario de Juicio 1985: (vol. 12) p. 4]. The Argentine agents of death by no means hold monopoly over the political tormenting of children. For example, Amnesty International's eerie document *Torture in the Eighties* (1984) reports that state sponsored torture of children has been reported in both El Salvador (1984: 155-6) and in Iraq (1984: 99).

In Argentina, family torture sessions were not uncommon [see CONADEP 1984: 20; Timerman 1981: 148-9]. For example, a man reports that after answering a number of questions negatively, security officers began brutally kicking and hitting with a belt his wife and their children, a 13-year-old, an 8-year-old, and a 3-year-old who were witnessing the inferno. Then, he said, the officers turned to their 20-day-old daughter and, to their horrified disbelief, they started shaking her violently and holding her head down by her feet, yelling 'if you don't talk, we'll kill her.' Next they filled the tub with water and submerged the mother several times, drowning her in front of her children (CONADEP 1984: 320).

The children were used for other instrumental purposes. For example, Josefina, a 5-year-old, was taken by the torturers to a bus terminal to identify friends and acquaintances of her parents (CONADEP 1984: 323). In other words, children were used as 'informants' to single out 'subversives' to be picked up and tormented. It was apparently easier to make the children 'cooperate' after showing them how their parents were tortured.

In other cases children were used as 'bait' by the security forces to entrap other 'subversives.' For example, Fernando, a 13-year-old boy, was used to single out friends of his parents. He was then ordered by his captors to set up a meeting with two friends of his parents. At that meeting the friends were kidnapped by security forces in front of the boy [see CONADEP 1984: 324].

The abuse of children was thus theatrically organized to force information out of the parents, to have the parents admit to 'subversion,' and/or to have them sign confessions. In other cases, children became innocent tools in the reproduction of terror. Actively working to capture 'subversives' is one such example. The mechanism seemed to work effectively and was based on the fact that the children were induced to expect that by cooperating they would earn their parents' freedom or at least better treatment for them. The scene was so morbid that there are reports that older children, particularly girls, would try to seduce guards in hope that their parents would be treated less brutally (Timerman 1981: 149). Seldom, if ever, did such sexual 'favors' result in better treatment.

The instrumental exploitation of children went beyond the immediate 'war-related' scenario.

Children of *desaparecidos*, particularly babies, were commonly taken as 'war booty' [see Chavez 1985a: 19-20; El Diario del Juicio 1985 (vol. 11): 254]. An Uruguayan woman, whose husband and nursing infant disappeared, related:

The 13th of July, 1976 between 11 and 11:30PM, they knocked on the door of our home in Barrio Belgrano in this Capital [Buenos Aires]. At that moment I was breast feeding my baby, Simon. They broke down the door and about 10 to 15 people, in civilian clothing, identified themselves as members of the Argentine Army and the Uruguayan Army. One of the officers introduced himself as Major Gavazzo of the Uruguayan Army. They searched the home and they found written materials which showed them that I worked for the cause of freedom in my country [Uruguay]; then they began torturing me. When they took me away, I asked them what would happen to my baby. They told me that I should not worry about that that they would keep him... That was the last time I saw Simon. [CONADEP 1984: 20]

Simon was probably sold in a lucrative black market or placed with a sterile military or upper-class couple. The moving film entitled *La historia oficial* treats the plight of a child so 'adopted' into an upper-middle-class family. And the documentary 'Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,' considers the pain of a group of mothers who silently marched around the national plaza for the last 7 years, demanding to know the fate of their sons and daughters who were 'disappeared' during the 'dirty war.'

Thus the torturers discovered and manipulated the value of children as the *priceless cathected appendix of the 'subversive.'* Children became a commodity to be exploited for information in the halls of death and were subsequently placed with families sympathetic to the regime. Yet before a child could be placed with a 'proper' family the torturers deemed necessary to radically sever his/her bonds with the 'contaminated subversive.' Thus assaulting children with electrical prods *in the presence of their parents* should be seen as serving both instrumental and expressive aims.

We have already explored the instrumental aspects of the abuse. Expressively torturing children, or torturing parents in front of the children, can also be seen as a *ritual of separation* in which

the torturers proceed to 'surgically remove' with electrical prods the subversive's precious 'appendix' before turning him/her to a security or upper-class family for proper Christian upbringing. We shall return to the implications of this in the following section.

The magnitude of the children's market was such that upon return to democracy the 'Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo' contacted a number of scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of California, etc., to identify disappeared children through studies establishing the genetic relatedness between a child and his or her biological relatives [see Slavin 1985: 1-7]. Neighbors who saw a childless couple 'adopt' a child under obscure circumstances during the 'dirty war' years are now encouraged to come forth to denounce them.

Pregnant women were treated like all other 'subversives.' That is, they were routinely tortured and often raped [see CONADEP 1984: 299-323]. Some military men eventually were compelled to confess crimes [see also Victor 1981]. A sergeant told the CONADEP that 'as a nurse he worked at the Hospital Campo de Mayo [a military installation] between 1976 and 1977. He reported that in the epidemiology wing of the hospital there were a number of pregnant women about to give birth. Their hands and feet were tied and they were given serum to accelerate the delivery. The nurse himself saw four or five women in this condition. He thought they were extremists... ' (CONADEP 1984: 308-9). He also reported that a guard named Falcon had raped a number of pregnant women (ibid.).

Pregnant women, or their husbands, were made to 'talk' by placing electric prods inside them, close to the uterus, to discharge electrical currents on the fetus. For example, one pregnant woman who survived her calvary reported that she was brutally tortured during the sixth month of her pregnancy. Subsequent to her release she gave birth to an abnormal child diagnosed as having brain damage (CONADEP 1984: 317-18).

In other cases, the strategy was to keep the mother alive until the birth of her child. The babies were then taken away from the mothers to be sold or placed with sterile couples. The mother could then be executed [see Slavin 1985: 1-7]. The military would fabricate illegal birth certificates, almost always signed by military physicians, in

order to place a child with a new couple. Schools are now alerted to report any suspicious birth certificates, particularly if signed by a military physician (*ibid.*)¹

The Body, Children, and the 'Reorganization' of Society

The difficult question of why entire families and specifically children entered the stage of terror as key protagonists requires further elaboration. Any satisfactory explanation should relate to both the instrumental and the expressive nature of a terrorist act.

On the instrumental level we have documented how children emerged as priceless commodities to be fully exploited in the politics of pain. Directly torturing a child, or torturing a parent in front of a child, seemed to be a facile way to elicit information from a 'subversive.' It is much harder to explore the possible symbolic dimensions of the politics of torture.[...]

A partial answer to *why children* can be explored in the context of the stated wishes of many high ranking officers in charge of the operation. In fact, there are a number of printed reports [see CONADEP 1984: 20] that high ranking officers of the security forces did specifically tell their men that *the war was not on the children* and that children should *not* be taught to grow up to hate the flag and the armed forces [See *El Diario del Juicio* 1985 vol. v]. Rather, their expressed wishes were that the children be *removed* from the 'subversives' and placed in 'proper' homes. When a desperate mother asked her tormenters what they would do with her nursing infant as he was being taken away, one said 'The war is not on children, we'll keep him' (CONADEP 1984: 20).

Yet we have documented that children of suspected 'subversives' were systematically abused regardless of the 'official policy.' We have also argued that any specific act of torture can be analyzed as a cultural and psychological metamessage conveying a multitude of meanings. I thus argue that the symbolics of political pain underlined the destructive and *reorganizational* agenda on the military operation.

The assault on children and the calculated collective spectacles of torture in which entire families participated are literalization of the military's fantasy of 'reorganizing' the Argentine social landscape. The agenda for reorganizing the social land-

scape was at the heart of why the children had to be removed from 'subversive' homes and placed elsewhere. The collective torture session themselves are viewed as a *rite de separation* (Van Genep 1960). Before a child could be placed with a military or an upper-class family for a good Christian education all ties with his/her tainted family had to be severed. Thus collective rituals of pain flourished before placing a child with an acceptable family. A sort of 'ideological surgery' was required to sever all bonds.

Indeed, the entire military operation had a very noted reorganizational tone. The very term 'Proceso de Reorganización Nacional' under which the military organized its campaign forcefully conveys this imagery. The entire nation needed a 'reorganization' according to the military. The assault on children and the family unit represents a most perverse translation of this fantasy of control and the 'reorganization' of life through death.

Terror as Social Control

Thus was forged what Taussig and others have appropriately termed a 'culture of terror' (see Taussig 1984: 467-97; Fagen 1985). Thousands of Argentines 'were disappeared' by security officers. The term came to capture the power of collective terror as brutal social control. Introducing the word *desaparecido* even in the security of a family discussion, produced a chilling effect. The relatives of *desaparecidos* often knew that a loved one was taken by the security forces. The term itself encouraged a form of prerational, magical thinking: just as a son or daughter magically 'disappeared' one day, they could so 'reappear' another. The networks of horror operated on what soon became a sacred currency, silence. Relatives were often contacted by the captors. Yet these contacts remained in closed secrecy. Money and possessions were extracted from relatives of 'disappeared' ones [see CONADEP 1984: 22-3], sometimes even after the *desaparecido* had been killed.

In some cases the *desaparecido* was allowed to talk to his or her relatives, usually over the telephone or through an intermediary. Expectations that the end of the nightmare was possible were thus implanted in the hearts and minds of relatives. The message was monothematic: 'be quiet,' 'don't talk to anyone or for sure she or he will be killed,' *Collective silence thus became part of the madness*

as if it intervened in the causality of events. Families of *desaparecidos* came to believe that should the rumor begin that a son or daughter was 'disappeared,' it would mean certain death. In truth, people died regardless of the code of strict silence.

Psychologically it is very hard to mourn without a corpse. Death, in the abstract, can never be as convincing as the body of a loved one. Without concrete evidence of death, there is always hope. Thus the networks of terror and control were firmly established. A collective hysterical denial permeated the atmosphere. In the midst of the horror, many people let themselves believe that there were some minor 'abuses,' but only of those who were 'implicados en algo' [involved in something]. How otherwise could they live with the knowledge that members of the security forces were torturing even children and pregnant women? Such reports were dismissed as part of an exaggerated 'international propaganda campaign' against Argentina.

The code of silence was fostered by other fears. To have a *desaparecido* in the family was like having a contagious disease. Life-long friends broke relationships for fear of being caught in the madness. They of course were active participants in the madness. A major fear was that should a person's name be in the private telephone book of a *desaparecido*, that name would become a target. Indeed, many other innocent people were thus recruited to the stage of terror. [...]

The Assault on Life: Torture and Child Abuse as Political Discourse

Instrumentally, torture became an intrinsic part of the military's political mission. Prisoners were routinely tortured before and during interrogation, before execution or before regaining freedom. In other cases people were tortured and let go free without ever been interrogated. The human body became the canvas in which the 'anatomists of pain' (Foucault 1979: 11) dramatized an ancient discourse on power and orthodoxy. Indeed a new inquisition was unleashed. The Christian and occidental way of life was to be saved by finally removing all atheist subversives from the landscape. The perverse medical - hygienic and surgical - imagery which accompanied the crusade again points to the paranoid atmosphere that emerged in the midst of the 'dirty war.' An infection had penetrated and was growing, spreading

throughout the 'fatherland.' A 'dirty' war was required to 'cleanse' the country of political contamination. Indeed, political killings were commonly referred to as 'cleanings.' 'Los vamos a limpiar' [we will clean you], was a common phrase out of the lips of the torturers. In fact, 'limpiar' [to clean] means to kill in Argentine slang, just as 'to waste' does in American English slang. It took a 'dirty' war to *limpiar* Argentina.

This imagined growth required radical surgical and hygienic intervention. The enemy must be completely extirpated from the fatherland. The new inquisition was thus framed in medical and sanitary symbolism over political orthodoxy. This metaphorical system also helps explain the prominent role physicians played during the 'dirty war.' In fact, many survivors reported that often during torture sessions, a military or police physician would come in, take their vital signs and proceed to inform the torturers whether to continue torturing, or whether to give the 'patient' a break. In fact the torture chambers themselves were known as the *quirofano*, or the 'operating room.'

The extermination took a very specific, indeed patterned, tone. Again, I argue that we must explain the torture, as well as the *specific* forms the torture took. Torture is never merely an instrumental act. Even when it is routine, as it certainly was in Argentina, each time a torturer discharges an electrical current through his prisoner's body, they become intimate partners in a poly-semantic ritual.

The expressive symbolism of torture is of fundamental importance to explore the unconscious agenda of the torturer. The phallus of men was routinely assaulted with electricity. The castration metaphor is unmistakable. In clandestine *quirofanos* the ideological surgeons thus emasculated godless 'subversives', turning the feared enemy into passive, castrated beings. The *macho* army men were turning 'dangerous subversives,' who had given them so much anxiety, indeed for the first time genuine fear, into harmless eunuchs. In the torturer's mind assaulting the penis was always related to the masculinity of their victim. For example, an 'ex-torturer' reported a torture session in which an officer ordered him to systematically place the electric prods in the testicles of a victim 'to see if he is such a *macho*' (Victor 1981: 67).

Women's generativity was also routinely assaulted. Running electro-shocks through the

sources of life, the vagina, uterus, and breasts was standard practice. Pregnant women were systematically tortured and raped [see CONADEP 1984: 309]. Systematically electrocuting the symbols of life was necessary to turn the mothers of potential dissidents into helpless beings to be sexually used and discarded. The keepers of the faith were symbolically assaulting the essence of dissident life.

The systematic electrical assault on the genitals is the kind of surgical intervention required for the society the agents of terror wished to carve out: a society of ruling *machos* and obedient, harmless *mansos*, castrated beings, that would not question orders but would just obey. This is the political agenda the repression advocated. In the halls of death, torture became the form through which they created the conforming citizens they wished to govern. In this case the body was the medium in which the 'reorganizing' fantasy surfaced.

The 'reorganization' of society required 'reorganizing' the basic social unit, the family. The family's affective bond was manipulated in skillful games of horror. Torturing a child may have been done to make a parent talk or sign a confession, but symbolically the torture ritual was the ultimate perversion in the universe of the pain: the surgical severing of the child from the 'contaminating' subversive, to violently break the intense affective bond that makes up the Argentine family. In all modern police states – whether rightist or leftist – children are used to get at the parents; as spies, informants, or to torture. *Divide et impera* is the rule of thumb. Indeed the torturers in Argentina concentrated on literally and symbolically 'dividing' families.

The Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman, who himself was brutally tortured, reflected on his encounters with absolute horror in several clandestine prisons. The obscenities enacted in the chambers of death produced the destruction on the units of life:

Of all the dramatic situations I witnessed in clandestine prisons, nothing can compare to those family groups who were tortured often together, sometimes separately but in view of one another, or in different cells, while one was aware of the other being tortured. The entire affective world, constructed over the years with utmost difficulty, collapses with a kick in the father's genitals, a smack on the mother's face, an obscene insult to the sister, or the sexual violation of

a daughter. Suddenly an entire culture based on familial love, devotion, the capacity for mutual sacrifice collapses. Nothing is possible in such a universe, and that is precisely what the torturers know.

The fathers' glances: of desperation at first, then of apology, and then of encouragement. Seeking some way to mutually help one another – sending an apple, a glass of water. Those fathers, thrown on the ground, bleeding, endeavoring for their children to find the strength to resist the tortures still in store for them. The impotence, that impotence that arises not from one's failure to do something in defense of one's children but from one's inability to extend a tender gesture. From my cell, I'd hear the whispered voices of children trying to learn what was happening to their parents, and I'd witness the efforts of daughters to win over a guard, to arouse a feeling of tenderness in him, to incite the hope of some lovely future relationship between them in order to learn what was happening to her mother, to have an orange sent to her, to get permission for her to go to the bathroom. (Timerman 1981; 148–9)

Torture and death of 'subversives' was the magical treatment against the spread of an infectious way of life. To simplify their thinking and to focus energy, the armed left, the democratic left, intellectuals, artists, psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, children, pregnant women, and other deviants were bunched together as representatives, or potential representatives, or sympathizers with an international assault penetrating the fatherland from the outside and growing, spreading within.

Conclusion

In early 1985, following the return to democratic rule, and responding to a worldwide outcry over the horrors committed by the military, an unprecedented phenomenon occurred in Argentina. For the first time in Latin American history, members of a prior *de facto* government were brought to civilian justice. For reasons of space, I can only briefly refer to the trial of the 9 commanders [for a full description of this trial see, *El Diario del Juicio* 1985]. Technically the six-man court was a court-martial, although under civilian control.

At the trial the military leaders continued to hide any remorse behind the ideological shield. General Videla dismissed all accusations asserting that 'terrorism is a global phenomena which will one day show that Argentina continues to be a priority

target' [see *El Diario del Juicio* 1985 (vol. 15): 351]. The battle goes on, the invisible enemy is everywhere, because it is within. Others, either hysterically or psychopathically, deny that any abuses took place and view the trial as the beginning of the end for the Christian and occidental way of life in Argentina.

These military leaders refuse to accept the legitimacy of the trial. According to them 'corrupted,' myopic politicians and civilians lack the moral authority and strength to pass judgment on their righteous crusade against the very essence of evil. General Videla, for example, 'ignores the court and reads, apparently from a book of spiritual meditations' (*The Economist* 1985: 38). In fact, right-wing military and paramilitary groups have already been found planting bombs to simulate a major leftist guerrilla comeback, and thus create the atmosphere in which another military takeover would be possible. The more recent revolts by younger officers in Campo de Mayo, Cordoba, and Salta over the jurisprudence and legitimacy of civilian courts over crimes committed during the 'Dirty War' again point to the military's castle-like attitude of depreciation of civilian institutions. Heuristically, it might prove fruitful to approach these new 'dirty wars' in reference not just to older models relating Latin authoritarianism to oligarcho-militaristic alliances to international interests, but also in terms of an internal structural logic of castlelike stratification and depreciation of the civico-democratic order.

On the 9th of December 1985, the civilian court found five of the former top military leaders guilty of crimes committed during the 'dirty war' [see Chavez 1985b: 1-2; Montalbano 1985: 1-2]. General Jorge Videla, President of the first junta and Admiral Emilio Massera, also a junta member, were given life sentences. General Roberto Viola, President of the second military junta, received a 17-year sentence. Admiral Armando Lambruschini, the second junta's Navy representative received 8 years; and Brigadier General Orlando Agosti, head of the Air Force and member of the first junta received a four-and-a-half year sentence. Four other military heads were acquitted (Chavez 1985b: 1-2).

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